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Hilltop Press



College Hill house offers second chances

By Heidi Fallon

Staff Reporter

COLLEGE HILL - Joyce Asfour has given an old white farmhouse new life to give others a second chance.

She calls the house Grace Place. Those who come through the red front door call it home, at least for a little while.

The Cary Avenue house is a temporary refuge for women, and sometimes families, in need. In many cases, the only baggage they bring is addiction, abuse and homelessness.

"We offer a home, a community really, for women with and without children who are in transition from homelessness," Asfour said.

"It just caught up with me," she said in her quiet, gentle voice.

She said she had been thinking about those who dedicate their lives to helping others.

"I thought to myself that if more of us did that what a difference it could make," she said. "And then I realized us is me."

She bought the house four years ago. Enlisting the help of volunteers and friends, including students from McAuley High School, Asfour remodeled the house to accommodate a maximum of 16 people.

There are bedrooms big enough for a small family as well as the single bedrooms.

Guests, as Asfour calls the people who come to her for help, are allowed to stay up to one year. During their stay, guests are referred to the appropriate social agencies.

"We are not an emergency shelter and we are not licensed counselors," said Kim Anderson, 43, a former corporate executive who left her job to live and volunteer at Grace Place.

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Anderson said that doesn't mean she and Asfour aren't available to give support however and whenever needed to those sharing their home.

Everyone is expected to share the evening meal, but during the day the guests are expected to be taking steps to turn their lives around.

It could be finding a job, attending classes to gain job skills, getting treatment for chemical dependency, or untangling themselves from an abusive relationship.

Grace Place relies solely on private donations for funding and volunteers to maintain both the house and the program.

Asfour said she always needs help with the meals and chores ranging from light housekeeping to running errands to planting vegetables in the garden.

Area churches, including St. James in White Oak, are her salvation, Asfour said. While Asfour's approach to helping is rooted in her own Catholic faith the house, as well as the appeal for volunteers, are open to all.

Besides needing volunteers, Asfour said there also is a constant need for donations of clothing, toys and furniture.

Once a guest is ready to move out and on with their life Asfour said she and Anderson help as much as they can, whether it's furnishing an apartment or simply being there for encouragement.

Asfour admits with a chuckle that many might consider her "kooky."

She said opening her door to strangers isn't new. She did it a lot when she and her husband were raising their three daughters.

"One of my daughters was always asking me why I couldn't be like other mothers," she said with a chuckle.

"I guess I've always been a social activist, but I decided it was time to stop doing things like writing my congressman and do something with real people."

So, she said, she decided to turn an old farmhouse into a place to heal, to rest for a bit and to be loved.

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