

Drake House turns around families in crisis

First year's statistics show non-profit fulfilling mission

By **HATCHER HURD**
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The Drake House has one mission since it opened its doors June 12, 2006 – that is to preserve families headed by single moms that are in crisis.

The non-profit organization is more than a shelter for 15 families who live in a recently rehabbed apartment complex in Roswell. It is a program of up to 90 days in which families get a respite from the threat or the reality of being homeless. Some stay a little longer, some leave sooner.

The single mothers at Drake House also receive counseling, seminars on parenting, job interviewing and resume writing as well as support from volunteer mentors.

"We call it a 90-day program in 30-day increments. Some stay longer than others. We want some flexibility built into the program," said Drake House Executive Director John Smith III.

The 40th family was recently accepted at The Drake House. Many were families living on the edge and needed only one more setback to tip the scales and send the family into crisis. It might be as simple yet as devastating as a blown head gasket on the car.

Like the poem "For Want of a Nail," an expensive car repair can mean the loss of the

car, which then means the loss of a job because the mother can't get to work which leads to an eviction and nowhere to go.

"Reasons for family break-ups range from job loss, eviction, illness to divorce or simple abandonment by their spouse," Smith said. "Most of our moms are under-employed – that means when one of the underpinnings of their fragile world is removed, they can no longer hold their family together."

Three years ago, even two, these North Fulton families would have nowhere to go. But the Greater North Fulton Chamber of Commerce's Leadership North Fulton program conceived the idea that evolved into the Drake House.

As part of the Leadership North Fulton's own mission to develop the next generation of business and community leaders, the participants are required to come up with community initiatives to improve the quality of life or to meet a community need. The United Way was receiving more than a thousand calls for assistance for single-mom families from North Fulton alone.

With the help of the business community and the faith-based community a Roswell apartment complex was purchased and renovated for 15 families and an on-site manager. The mortgage was secured by anonymous



HATCHER HURD/Staff

John Smith III and Christy Merritt make The Drake House are pleased with the progress the organization has made since its startup a little over a year ago.

volunteers, and the renovated apartments began receiving clients.

In addition to those 40 families helped to date, the intervention has changed the lives of 68 children as well.

"That is pretty remarkable for the first year," Smith said. "But we could not have done it without the entire community – business and faith-based. The whole program is sustained by the volunteers in this community. They keep the train on the track."

The success achieved is ultimately up to the families, mainly the moms. That is why rules are strict. Drake House can't afford to take moms who are not prepared to take full advantage of what the program has to offer.

"So far we have not had to turn anyone away, but people must meet certain eligibility requirements," said Christy

Merritt who works closely with families at Drake House as the programs director.

For example, clients must be willing to take a drug screening and agree to a criminal background check. If they are not truly homeless, they don't get in the program.

"Some candidates have elected not to enter the program for various reasons. We must separate those who really need this program and those who are not really ready to address their needs," Merritt said. "Our space is just too valuable. We have to make the space available to those with the highest likelihood of success."

Smith agreed, saying it is like doctors who do triage after a major disaster. They help those who have the best chance to recover first. The program can provide only a limited number of opportuni-

ties, and it must make each one count.

"We need to invest on those who are willing to work with us," Smith said.

Once accepted into the program, families must agree to receive no visitors, not even the families within the project. The women understand they need to keep their focus on getting their lives turned around.

A social worker is assigned to work with them each week on what is called an empowerment plan. Together the woman and the social worker identify her needs, set goals and then create an action plan.

In addition, Drake House provides workshops with speakers who address topics such as personal finance, parenting, job skills and health

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Want to Volunteer?

Who we are: The Drake House is a crisis residential assessment center for homeless women and children in the North Fulton area providing immediate residential housing combined with an empowerment program designed to provide stability for the children and assist the family in working toward housing self sufficiency.

Our goal is to create an environment that allows homeless families to:

- Be included in North Fulton community life
- Enjoy a stabilized, improved quality of life
- Make increasingly responsible choices
- Exert greater control over their life circumstances
- Develop and exercise their competencies and talents
- Experience personal security and self-respect



The Drake House
Bridging Hope and Opportunity

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and wellness. Each apartment has a team of volunteers who provide positive reinforcement and encouragement.

"We want them to monitor good relationships, and these volunteers provide that. They are also extra eyes, ears and hands for staff," Merritt said. "And they provide emotional support – sometimes for people who have never had that before."

Smith and Merritt say the volunteers are a huge part of the success of the program. Each apartment has sponsoring volunteers who provide that arm to lean on – some from the civic and business community, some from the faith community and some are just couples who want to be involved.

The Alpharetta Kiwanis Club sponsors the resident management unit, for example. The First Baptist Church of Roswell sponsors four apartments. The Board of Education is cooperating by allowing children in school to remain in the district from which they came.

In return for shelter at no rent, the families agree to work their way back to self-sufficiency. There have been some failures, but many more have been successful. Three out of four families find their own home before leaving the program.

"They sign a contract with performance standards, so both sides know what the expectations are," said Merritt.

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