

It takes sisters to make a house a home on East Side

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STAFF REPORTER

Remember the classic sitcom "The Facts of Life," where four girls with diverse backgrounds are thrown together to learn and grow together under the watchful eye of Mrs. Garrett? That exact thing is happening here in Buffalo. Eastland Academy takes on the form of Mother Teresa Home, a house that provides a safe, stable place for women who have received pressure regarding their pregnancies.

Currently, four young mothers reside at the house, the former rectory of St. Adalbert Parish, with two of their very young children. There they receive shelter, food, support and guidance on how to become self-sufficient.

"We're that stepping stone to get them to that next step," explained Cheryl Calire, director of the office of Pro-Life Activities for the Diocese of Buffalo, which oversees the house.

Each resident goes through an intake interview. Once they get a room, they set a series of goals, which usually include education, employment and a residence of their own. The goals for each woman might be similar, but each journey is as diverse as the women themselves.

"We are able to reach our goals, but the path has been much different than I had ever imagined. I think that's because, I, like the general public, probably made some assumptions that everybody's going to fit the same way. What I found, is everybody has got something so very unique," said Calire. "Just as Christ has created us all unique, unique are their circumstances and there is not a one-size-fits-all answer at the Mother Teresa Home. Let's figure out where you are, let's figure out where you want to be, and let's figure out what steps we need to make that happen."

Meghan is 31 years old. In the last six months, she has lost her father and boyfriend to heroin overdoses and gave birth to a daughter, who was immediately

placed in foster care. While trying to get help from the Department of Social Services and other agencies, she was put in touch with Calire and Mother Teresa Home.

"Cheryl was willing to meet me that day," Meghan said.

One of Meghan's goals is to regain custody of both her newborn and older daughter. Mother Teresa Home provides "stable housing," a requirement for custody. She also joined a parenting program and has hooked up with agencies such as Buffalo Prenatal-Perinatal Network, a not-for-profit organization that collaborates with key stakeholders in Erie County to increase access to health care services for mothers and mothers to be.

"So, this really just gives me a second chance to regain some structure in my life and to appease the courts," Meghan said. "I'm determined to fight and get my girls back. But, if I didn't have this foundation behind me, it would be a literally impossible task."

With the help of Calire and Mother Teresa Home coordinator Olivia Giza, Meghan is able to work on her court menu, a list of tasks she must complete in order to gain custody. Giza makes sure Meghan attends her drug, mental health and grief counseling sessions. When she makes some progress, she can have overnight visits with her daughters, then weekends, then primary care.

Kaitlyn's world got flipped over when she broke up with her boyfriend, the father of her 7-month-old son. Her mother's boyfriend didn't want her to move in with them. Her stepmother already had a full house. So, she now calls Mother Teresa's home.

Her goals are to get her GED, then get her own place to live. Without support she could not take care of her son and study, which makes getting a good job and paying bills all the harder. Once she moved in to the home three months ago, Calire set her up with daycare. Now, she has time to study and work at the downtown library.

The women not only live



DAN CAPPELLAZZO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

David Calire holds Giovanni at the Mother Teresa Home, 208 Stanislaus St., in Buffalo, where his mother, Kaitlyn, lived during her pregnancy.

together, they work with each other, learning from their strengths and helping with their weaknesses. Kaitlyn learned to cook from Dawn, the one they call "mother."

"I remember the first day she came here I was making, everyone thinks it's so weird, fried noodles and eggs. I offered her some, and she said, 'What are you making?' She didn't want none. That night, she taught me how to make fried chicken. Ever since then, she has been teaching me more and more about cooking," she said.

For Meghan, who has two daughters in foster care, and Dawn, now pregnant with twin daughters, plus two sons living with their grandmother, seeing the other mothers taking care of their kids, sets an example for what home life will be once they gain custody. They learn how to be mothers to their own children.

"Watching the other girls with their babies, I'm literally seeing what my responsibilities are going to be," said Meghan.

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Residents build a sisterhood among themselves

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Giza has been serving in the Mrs. Garrett role of housemother since July, driving the mothers to appointments and helping them find the right daycare, jobs and classes they need to make their goals. She also organizes volunteer groups that come in, such as Buffalo Prenatal Perinatal Network that gives advice to the women and recommendations for other organizations that might help them.

"I'm here during the day when Cheryl is not. I also help her out if she is overwhelmed like she usually is, and try and pick up some of her slack and make her job a little easier," she said.

She sees the sisterhood that the young ladies built amongst themselves.

"They're actually really great. The newest girl to come in, they really just adopted her, the first three girls all started around June/July, but as soon as a new person comes in they make sure that they feel welcome, offer to cook with them. A couple of the girls cook together almost every night. They combine all the food that they have and split it among everybody who's here," she said, adding how important friends can be when family and boyfriends are not available. "It's lonely being a single parent."



DAN CAPPELLAZZO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Mother Teresa Home in Buffalo, houses pregnant women and helps them during their pregnancy.