

Secret House Offers Respite, Safety to Abused

by Lodie Fuller

Have you or anyone you know been physically or emotionally abused—a victim of domestic violence?

In times of such fear and distress, there is a safe refuge, a Secret House, offering help, support, and protection for abused and children.

No one enters through the front door and though the porch and yard are well kept, no one lounges or plays there, even on the most inviting days. You won't see or hear children riding their plastic vehicles in front of this house, nor will you see parents gathered there to observe and visit.

There is a fenced backyard, complete with swings and tricycle trails. Here is where you hear the sounds of scampering children and mothers' directives.

Innumerable stories have been exchanged within these walls—epics of failure and despair, delicately threaded with hopes for success and happiness. The mood is usually serious and thoughtful, but also hopeful. The temporary residents go about making themselves and their youngsters as comfortable as possible in their new surroundings.

This is a substitute home and respite for women who are abused and/or battered and their children—a haven kept secret for the protection of these victims. In this environment, mothers and children are welcomed with unconditional caring and non-judgmental acceptance. They are provided room and board, laundry facilities, transportation, child care, counseling, and encouragement while they are trying to realign their lives.

The women and older children share chores and responsibilities to maintain their new dwelling, a process discloses many facets of human behavior, and offers insights. Relationships are not always amicable or long term, but each new acquaintance brings some degree of awareness, some new experience to the group. From cooking to toilet scrubbing, each personality responds in its own way. And whether there are angry words or cheerful compromises, each individual absorbs some valuable information and wisdom.

These women of varying ages and circumstances are searching for viable support to sustain them when their protective housing has run its course of allotted time. There are outgoing phone calls in search of homes and jobs, often urgent pleas to family members, and inevitable conversations with the repenting abusers who beg, plead, promise, or threaten in their quest to reunite the family.

In many instances, the emotional or physical bruises have not yet caused the women to sever their attachment and there is a trickle of electricity that ignites thoughts of reconciliation—reasoning that the abuse may not occur again. When the little ones cry because they miss their daddy, the transition of escape is even more burdened with doubt, guilt, and difficult questions. However, the injured now has a safety net in which she can examine her options and decisions—make

choices for her future and take advantage of the counseling available to her in this congenial atmosphere.

Yes, the children have a struggle, too. They wonder how and why their parents can be so angry at each other, and how they can rationalize that separating them from what they know as home can ease their hurts or change their situation. They miss their familiar space, hectic and inappropriate as it may have been. Some babies are too nervous to sleep while some teenagers withdraw and remain sullen. A few youngsters do not display the expected fear and confusion. They actually seem to enjoy and accept the new arrangement, but their eyes belie their seeming confidence.

Volunteers at the secret house try to be helpful—to assist in creating a peaceful, relaxed setting for distressed guests, regardless of attitudes, habits, or behaviors. These unpaid caregivers are on hand, in various capacities to do whatever is required in the process of giving.

Their volunteers' efforts also are meant to lighten the load of busy staff people, who just spend so much of their time coordinating the program, instructing and facilitating classes, counseling and raising funds to support the continuation of this service. All are bound by a non-disclosure policy and must abide by the strictest rules of secrecy and confidentiality—never to mention the address of this sanctuary or point it out to any person, under any circumstance. The safety and comfort the occupants are first priority.

Professionals and volunteers alike know they have done their utmost to lend support and assistance to those in desperate need. They understand that the circle of abuse can and must be interrupted and they hope that the percentage of families reunited in a safe and responsible framework is a high one.

In time, perhaps there will be no need for Secret Houses, but until then, they remain cheerful shelter for those whose lives are in turmoil. The key to their existence is the work of dedicated associates and financial support from the community.

It is so important that women today remove themselves and their youngsters from any abusive situation, to be responsible for their own welfare. Always keeping the vision of safety and happiness, they can make changes toward creating their ideal future.

For information about services in this area, call 485-6513, a Womenspace crisis line, for immediate direction for choices and options, or 485-8232 to discuss questions regarding domestic violence and specific situations.

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