

CLEVELAND'S Blessing House

The front door is always open for families in crisis.

BY JERRI DONOHUE

It's 11:00 on a hot summer night. Notre Dame Sister Mary Berigan joins a woman and her three preschoolers at a picnic table in a city park. Using a flashlight for illumination, the mother completes paperwork necessary to place her children at Blessing House, the crisis nursery Sister Berigan oversees in Lorain, Ohio.

Later, the mother weeps as she straps her kids into car seats in Sister Berigan's van. For the next week or so, however, she will tackle major problems, confident that they are safe.

"Every time I think I've seen the most difficult situation for kids to come from, somebody shows up at the door, or we get a call about somebody," Sister Berigan says.

Sometimes the police are present when Sister Berigan is summoned to a home to pick up children, an increasing number of whom come to Blessing House from environments poisoned by drugs or domestic violence. While a woman extricates herself from an abusive relationship, her children are safer elsewhere.

"We have met folks in parking lots, in the mall, whatever, so that we could transition the kids . . . and not be followed," Sister Berigan says.



PHOTOS BY WILLIAM RIETER

The humble exterior of Blessing House is balanced by the extraordinary stories of compassion and care for children in crisis since it opened in 2005.

Lost in the Shuffle

Less dangerous problems, such as sudden eviction or loss of utilities, prompted Sister Berigan and her friend Donna Humphrey to found Blessing House. These, and similar dilemmas, still lead most families to seek its help.

Sister Berigan, a parochial school principal, and Humphrey, a certified public accountant, had recognized the need for an emergency shelter for children when both were volunteering with Voices for Children, a national advocacy group.

Humphrey explains that when a child's future must be determined in court because



of allegations of abuse or neglect, the children's services social worker often is grappling with a heavy workload and, therefore, is unable to gather all the information pertinent to the case. Voices for Children can step in.

"They train volunteers to investigate a child's situation solely from the aspect of 'What is best for this child?'" Humphrey says.

As court-appointed *guardians ad litem*, she and Sister Berigan were authorized to speak to teachers, neighbors, doctors, Scout leaders, and others to learn everything they could about a child, and then report the findings to a judge. Although assigned different cases, the

longtime friends frequently made home visits together.

"What we started to find were families that weren't abusive to their children or purposely neglecting their children," recalls Sister Berigan. "But they were getting overwhelmed."

Parents struggled with problems caused by poverty, such as the temporary shutoff of utilities for nonpayment. Some kids came to the attention of children's services, for instance, because they wore unlaundered clothing to school day after day. Meanwhile, single parents often had no trustworthy person to watch their offspring while they dealt with a temporary crisis.

Children find more than just shelter at Blessing House. When they need it most, their home is made warmer by the soothing presence of Moses, a certified therapy dog.

(Right) Both court-appointed *guardians ad litem* Sister Mary Berigan (left) and Donna Humphrey (right) opened the doors of Blessing House to assist families who had run out of options.

(Far right) After their housing situations are resolved, these children pictured here will add their handprints to the hundreds of others on the Blessing House's play-room walls.



"If the mom or dad doesn't have an appropriate relative for the kids to stay with for a short period of time, how do they have the time or energy to get everything done they have to do?" Sister Berigan asks.

Humphrey points out that a mother can get in trouble for leaving her children with the wrong adult. "She shouldn't be losing them when she had no other option," Humphrey says.

A Leap of Faith

Sister Berigan's experience eventually pushed the two friends to open a children's shelter. One evening, the nun brought a 2-month-old baby home to her convent. During a visit with a teenage mother she had befriended, Sister Berigan learned the young woman had made the painful decision to relinquish her infant for adoption. There was no emergency nursery where the mother could place her child until Catholic Charities arranged for a temporary foster home, and so the teen insisted Sister Berigan take the baby girl with her.

Sister Berigan later discussed the episode with Humphrey.

"Wouldn't it be nice to have a place where children could go when their families had an emergency and there was no safe place for them to stay?" Sister Berigan mused.

Humphrey, who describes herself as "practical," realized how ambitious such an undertaking would be. She embraced it, nonetheless, trusting that they would find a way.

"From the very beginning, God's message to us was 'If you take care of the ones I send you, I'll take care of you,'" she recalls.

The women researched crisis-care nurseries



around the country and then traveled to Michigan, Indiana, and Wisconsin to study operations similar to the one they proposed.

Next, they presented their plan to Sister Berigan's religious community.

"We explained what we wanted to do as a mission we felt God was calling us to," Humphrey says. "With that approach, we were able to truly understand that if God wanted it to happen, it would."

Her sisters agreed that Sister Berigan should leave her job as an elementary school principal to oversee the project. They also pledged financial support.

Before long, Jane Jonesco, an attorney working in fund development, volunteered to help with legal matters and fund-raising, and she contributed countless hours to those tasks. Humphrey and her husband, Pat, a deacon, are associates of the Sisters of the Humility of Mary. That community also contributed money.

In addition, Blessing House received an early grant from the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine, and ongoing donations from Protestant congregations, Catholic parish groups, local foundations, businesses, and civic organizations.

A series of coincidences led Sister Berigan and Humphrey to a sympathetic landlord and



PHOTOS BY WILLIAM RIETER

a perfect house, and then to contractors who remodeled it.

“As we encountered each challenge—getting funding, finding a house, getting a license, getting the right people [for staff]—we were blessed with what we needed when we needed it,” Humphrey recalls.

A Safe Haven

The women found a name for their project in Mark 10:14–16 (“Let the children come to me. . . . Then he embraced them and blessed them”). The nonprofit, nondenominational home became “Blessing House.”

Blessing House opened in April 2005, one of only two children’s crisis-care centers in Ohio. With the exception of two or three days each year, the yellow two-story home has been occupied ever since, even on Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Staffed 24 hours a day, it can shelter as many as 10 children. Kid-friendly themes—dogs, Noah’s ark, lighthouses, and hot-air balloons—decorate its spacious bedrooms. The fenced-in yard boasts swings, a slide, a sandbox, and plenty of room to play. Because of its handicapped-accessible first-floor bathroom, the facility can accommodate children in wheelchairs.

As director, Sister Berigan draws on her skills

and experience as a school administrator. Humphrey serves as business manager, handling payroll, writing grant proposals, and preparing the budget.

The first child, a little boy, arrived at Blessing House soon after it opened. To commemorate his stay, Sister Berigan invited the preschooler to dip his hand in finger paint and leave his mark on the bare playroom wall. From that lone print, a cherished tradition was born. Hundreds of children aged two days to 12 years have found a safe haven at Blessing House, and most of them gleefully left their handprints in vibrant primary colors on its walls. Babies leave tiny footprints.

About 50 percent of the time, parents are waiting to place their children in Blessing House.

“Usually the waiting list consists of families who have housing issues and are temporarily staying with family or friends and need a place for their children to go while they make arrangements to deal with their housing problems,” Humphrey says.

Agencies refer parents to Blessing House during emergencies ranging from homelessness to hospitalization of a parent. On one occasion, Sister Berigan collected children at a hospital moments before their mother delivered a baby.

In some cases, children come to Blessing House while their single parent embarks on a marathon of job interviews. Others stay while children’s services personnel explore the possibility of placing them with relatives. A small number of children leave Blessing House for foster care.

(Above) Far from a cold, serious environment, Blessing House makes kids feel right at home with fun, colorful bedrooms—decorated with everything from Noah’s ark to *Blue’s Clues*.

For more on Cleveland’s Blessing House, log in to your digital edition at StAnthonyMessenger.org.

Digital Extras

Grace Center Provides 'Cheerleading' for Parents

After they weather an emergency, parents whose children found a safe haven at Blessing House often need additional support. The crisis-care center provides further help to about 90 percent of the families who use its services. The others either decline assistance or do not need it.

From its earliest years, Blessing House has distributed clothing, school supplies, and, occasionally, furniture or used appliances, and it sponsors an Adopt-a-Family program at Christmastime.

"We connect those who want to give with those who need," Sister Berigan says.



In the autumn of 2012, Blessing House expanded its efforts to stabilize families by opening Grace Center in an adjacent building. Parents explain their greatest concern to social worker Lea Arcuri, who helps them develop a step-by-step plan to address problems ranging from utility bills to a child's misbehavior. The social worker also recommends resources before trouble escalates.



"The gift of Blessing House is that the center of everything is love," Arcuri says.

Arcuri describes Blessing House staff as "cheerleaders" for parents who have nobody else to encourage them as they work to improve their lives. Trusting relationships develop, and many families remain in touch after they no longer need assistance. Sister Berigan still hears from the parents of the first child to stay there.



Initially, most guests stayed at Blessing House for 48 hours. In recent years, the average stay has stretched to six or seven days, and some kids remain for several weeks.

"In the beginning, families came with one area of need," Sister Berigan recalls. Now parents who are juggling multiple problems turn to Blessing House. "Situations are more complex for some families and it takes longer to resolve problems," Sister Berigan explains.

Parents sign papers to put their children in the care of Blessing House, but they retain legal custody. Most mothers visit or call daily. Blessing House does not charge parents for its services.

Not Just Housing, but a Home

While children often arrive under chaotic circumstances, Blessing House's attentive caregivers quickly settle them into a predictable, comforting routine of meal, bath, and bedtime.

"Almost all [staff members] are very actively practicing faith-based individuals," Humphrey says. "They're here because it's more than just a job to them."

Caregivers talk with the kids, do crafts with them, and help with homework.

"Probably one of the best things we have to offer is an adult who spends time and is interested," Sister Berigan says.

So that their education is not interrupted, Sister Berigan chauffeurs Blessing House guests to their regular classes, driving to three or four schools each week. To date, she has delivered students to 83 elementary schools, Head Start programs, and preschools. Her certified therapy dog, Moses, usually rides with them. He is the current in a series of adopted golden retrievers who have accompanied Sister Berigan to work since Blessing House opened. Moses is a magnet for new arrivals.

"He's so nonthreatening, they'll sit down and pet him," Sister Berigan says. Older children read to Moses. Younger ones snuggle beside him. Out in the yard, the gentle three-legged dog—a powerful model for handling adversity—romps with the kids.

Blessing House has sheltered more than 900 children so far.

"I am continually amazed and humbled by the fact that we have served that many children," Sister Berigan says.

She often receives touching reminders of the impact the emergency shelter makes on individual lives. Last summer, she drove a little boy who had spent many weeks at Blessing House to a permanent home with his grand-



mother. En route, her small passenger seemed worried. At last he blurted out his concern: How could he reach Sister Berigan if he needed to return to Blessing House? When the nun assured him that his grandmother had the phone number, the child insisted that he should have it, too.

Sister Berigan promptly gave the recent kindergarten graduate her business card.

“I’ll never forget it,” recalls Sister Berigan. “It was in his shorts pocket when he got to Grandma’s house.”

Such moments reinforce the sense of mission Sister Berigan and Humphrey share as they confront the unending challenge of fund-raising. They are resigned to the imminent loss of a significant source of funding; yet they are confident that they will find a way to replace it.

“We operate on the belief that God is calling us to do what we do and that our needs will be met,” Sister Berigan says.

Meanwhile, the women cherish the thank-you Sister Berigan recently received from a teenager who had stayed at Blessing House years earlier. “You fed me. You clothed me. You made me feel like it was my actual home,” the girl wrote.

“It’s very humbling when something like that happens,” Humphrey says. “But it’s God saying, ‘This is what I want you to do. Just let me take care of it and I will.’”

“I don’t think God is done with us yet.” 

Jerri Donohue is a freelance writer from Brecksville, Ohio. She is a frequent contributor to the *Catholic Universe Bulletin*, the newspaper of the Diocese of Cleveland, and most recently wrote “From Pain to Purpose” in our September 2014 issue.

(Left) The direct impact of the efforts of Blessing House are felt both by the staff and the families assisted long after a child leaves a handprint on the playroom wall.

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