

HomeFront Happenings

WINTER 2020

When Someone Believes in You

A HOMEFRONT HOLIDAY TALE

It was an unusually busy afternoon twenty years ago when the young pregnant woman awkwardly took her seat in the crowded waiting room. She was new to HomeFront but she had exhausted all other avenues of help and had two children to care for and another on the way in a month. She would endure the humiliation she always felt at these places to get some food for her kids. She settled in to wait her turn. Staff told the lovely, clearly uncomfortable, pregnant girl that Connie Mercer, the head of the whole place, would see her so she wouldn't have to wait longer.

"I have always been a very guarded, private person," explains Crystol, "but there was something about Connie, how still and quiet she was, how non-judgmental, that made me just open up and tell her everything about the trauma I had endured; the abusive, nomadic childhood, the years of loneliness and living from hand to mouth and how now, I was homeless since I lost my warehouse job when they found out I was pregnant."

HomeFront moved Crystol and her family into Huchet House, the residential safe haven for pregnant women, and Crystol remembers feeling like she was in heaven. "It was so clean there and I could breathe in fresh air. My old landlord was always trying to push into my apartment, and I was so scared I would nail boards over the door to feel safe. At Huchet House, I slept well for the first time in months, and, gosh, how we ate!"

Just two days after Crystol had her baby, she was dressed in a donated suit at an interview for a job in a Hamilton dentist's office that HomeFront had arranged for her. She got that job and has been working constantly ever since, but true stability took years to achieve. "HomeFront took care of securing me a new apartment but I was still vulnerable to homelessness for several years. Someone at HomeFront would always call me to check up and encourage me at low points. Their belief in me

was unwavering. I got to where I would always try to have three jobs at once so that, if I got laid off from one, I wouldn't lose my apartment."

Inspired by Connie and the staff at HomeFront, Crystol added night school to her three jobs, and is about to become a Licensed Social Worker and help kids living lives like hers used to be. "I work in the Trenton School System and see kids come to school every day carrying their stuff in a brown grocery sack, trying to figure out where they will stay that night."

She met the love of her life and got married. She and her husband banked every penny from second

jobs for three years and put a down payment on a large home in a manicured development where they are fostering two teenage girls. Her dream is to manage a 'treatment home' for up to five kids.

"HomeFront's unwavering belief in me got me through so many dark times," Crystol muses. "I want to pass that unconditional love on to as many kids as I can."



HomeFront's unwavering belief in me got me through so many dark times — I want to pass that on.



Our Wish List:

- Non-perishable food items
- Vehicles in working order
- Diapers and baby wipes
- Personal hygiene products
- Feminine hygiene products
- Small electric heaters
- Linens and blankets
- Winter coats and accessories
- Wrapping paper and AA & AAA batteries for holiday gifts

To donate items or get more information, contact us: at (609) 915-1035, or getinvolved@HomeFrontNJ.org
Also see our Amazon wishlist: tinyurl.com/HFCovidRelief

With your help, 413,568 diapers and baby wipes were distributed through our Diaper Resource Center last year.



On the Cover

Each HomeFront newsletter features work created by an artist in ArtSpace. This Winter issue's scene was painted by Sharon.

Notes From Connie's Desk

Dear Reader,

Most of us are looking forward to what 2021 will bring; a viable vaccine, perhaps the freedom to go to the movies or attend a huge celebration! However, as is often the case with our most vulnerable families, this good news will be bad for them — extremely bad.

Since Governor Murphy declared a state of emergency to help control the spread of COVID-19, there has been a statewide moratorium on renters' evictions, designed to keep people off the streets and infecting other people. This moratorium will cease two months after the state of emergency ends, whenever that will be. Meanwhile, many renters have lost their jobs and become farther and farther behind on the monthly payments that landlords need to pay their mortgages. A dark reckoning is coming.

What will this mean for our area? What will you see happening? After consultation with the heads of the Mercer County Courts and the Department of Human Services, we estimate that, unless protective measures are taken by the government, at least 4,000 households will be facing eviction in our community, a 600% increase over

pre-pandemic levels. This will be an unprecedented crisis, plain and simple.

What will HomeFront do? All we can do is fill up our shelter and use whatever homelessness prevention funds we have to pay landlords a portion of the back rent due, like creditors are paid in a bankruptcy, to allow tenants to keep their apartments and start fresh. We know we can't do this for all 4,000 families though. Many, so many, will be back languishing with their children in those dreadful motels or sleeping in their cars.

I want you to know that HomeFront will do whatever we can for those families if and when the time comes. We will find a way to ramp up our lifesaving outreach to more families in motels. We will find a way to provide food and necessities. We will show the homeless children that they are loved and valued. We promise.

Thank you,

Connie Mercer
HomeFront Founder and CEO

Food for Thought

1.2 million people, 13% of NJ's population of 8.99 million, have not had regular access to food during COVID-19.

SOURCE: The Wall Street Journal

Even before COVID-19, **41% of Garden State households were considered among the working poor**, which means those who struggled to afford basic necessities like food, healthcare, transportation and housing.

SOURCE: www.NJ.com

Between March and October, during COVID-19, **HomeFront has distributed over 342,315 meals** to hungry families in our community.

SOURCE: HomeFront COVID Impact Report

The Wheels Go Round and Round

The ancient Joy Hopes and Dreams school bus that was 32 kids' weekly passport to tutoring and enriching adventures has been limping along for the last year, spending more and more time in the repair shop. Those days are over thanks to Martha and Scott Blandford who donated a brand new, built-to-order bus for the kids.

"This was such a fun and exciting project for us!" explains Martha Blandford. "The bus is called **Margo's Bus**



after my late mom. She and my father had always helped the less fortunate in their home town of Frankfort, KY. Help-

ing others in big and small ways was a part of their human fiber. So, with her help, we happily decided to give the bus. She would have been so proud to make such a difference in so many kids' lives.

"When I went to see the bus for the first time, a young child staying at the Family Campus greeted me and took a ride on the bus with me. He smiled and said, 'This bus is going to take me to all kinds of wonderful places.'"

HomeFront Halloween Was a "Boo!tiful" event

The pandemic could not keep HomeFront kids from the spooky delights of Halloween, thanks to the efforts of our dedicated volunteers, staff and students from Rider University. Accompanied by live music from Jesse Neuman, AKA Mr. Jesse, who gives virtual music classes to our kids, superheroes and princesses living at the Family Campus visited socially distanced, decorated cars in the campus parking lot to gather Halloween treasure.

"The goal for us hosting Trunk or Treat was to begin making things normal again for the kids. Halloween is one thing that all kids enjoy, no matter where they come from." said Shaneica Kutisha, assistant director of our Atkinson Child Development Center.

"I worry so much about how they're adjusting to life right now. Thank goodness for our volunteers. I only had to send the flyer, not even as a special request, and they were thrilled to help. They love the kids and the kids love them. It was a very special day."



Our Joy, Hopes and Dreams children's program continued to find safe and creative ways to make memories this fall.

Our Community Cares

So Much to Be Thankful For



Thanks to a caring community, HomeFront distributed 1,500+ Thanksgiving Baskets to local families this Thanksgiving. “This year has been really hard for my family and I wasn’t sure how I was going to buy groceries for Thanksgiving dinner.” explains Marci, a HomeFront client. “I came to HomeFront and they gave me all the fixin’s for a meal, a gift card for a turkey – and groceries for a whole week! I have so much to be thankful for.”

Be an Angel this Holiday Season

Over 1,500 local kids need a little magic more than ever this holiday season. There are two ways you can play Santa. If you would like to sponsor a specific child and shop for his or her holiday wishes, call the North Pole elves at **609-915-1035**.

You can also make magic without ever leaving your house by ordering gifts to be distributed in the community through the HomeFront Holiday Wish List on Amazon: <https://tinyurl.com/HFHolidayWishes>.

Either way, COVID-19 won’t stop Santa this year!



The window at our pop-up donation and information center in Palmer Square.

Homelessness and Hunger Awareness Week Focuses on COVID Impact

HomeFront observed National Homelessness and Hunger Awareness Week from November 13th to 20th. The week was rich with compelling virtual events. These included a virtual tour of the HomeFront facilities and a thought-provoking panel discussion with local social service leaders, poverty researchers and a former HomeFront client on the impact COVID-19 is having on our most vulnerable neighbors. There was also a pop-up information and donation center in Palmer Square, Princeton where visitors stopped by to donate our most-needed items and learn more about how they can get involved. Thanks to our amazing volunteers!

Here @ HomeFront

Interested in a virtual tour? Email GetInvolved@HomeFrontNJ.org to learn more.

Handmade Art Deserves Handmade Frames

HomeFront clients in our ArtSpace program are expanding their talents by learning to use power tools to make the picture frames for their art!



Thanks to our gifted volunteer David Wasserman, original art and prints from ArtSpace will now come with “made with love” frames by our talented artists.



Getting Festive at Our Family Campus

It has become a tradition at the HomeFront Family Campus for the kids in each residential room to go all out to decorate their room door for the holiday season. “It’s like putting a wreath on the door of your house,” said Liza Peck, Family Campus Support Services Liaison. “It makes the room feel like home and gives the family joy and hope every time they go in and out.”



Talented gardeners from the Stony Brook Garden Club visited our Family Campus in November to plant tulip and daffodil bulbs. We look forward to watching them bloom come Spring!

Look at what we did last year –

32,417 the number of times families came for – and were given – shelter, food and assistance

5,642 meals were provided to homeless individuals in area motels through our Double Helpings program

1,219 clients received services at our health clinic including sick visits, well-baby visits and more.

179 parents received high school equivalency diplomas or jobs through our Hire Expectations program.

151 families received emergency housing assistance to keep them in their homes or to acquire decent housing

It works. **1** family at a time.



Believe!

At HomeFront, we believe in magic, miracles and hope. Each day, not just during the holidays, we witness dreams come true, miracles happening and the hope within every mother, father and child we touch.

To you, our reader, our donor, our volunteer—we wish you the magic of miracles and hope. We are honored and grateful that you are part of our amazing HomeFront family.

— HomeFront Staff & Client Families

Emma, age 6

Help Us Save! If you'd like to receive HomeFront Happenings online, let us know and we'll add your name to our paperless list. Contact HomeFront@HomeFrontNJ.org



“No one is useless in this world who lightens the burdens of another.”
— CHARLES DICKENS

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