

Here's how Bridge of Hope helps local mothers experiencing homelessness

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Ethan Dunnenberger never expected to find joy during a worldwide pandemic. But the Temple University graduate discovered helping someone else was the surest way to help himself, especially after COVID-19 prompted him to move home to Lancaster and work virtually as a business videographer and consultant. “It’s hard to be grateful,” he says. “This hasn’t been the best year.”



Life, however, improved considerably when Ethan Dunnenberger started volunteering for Bridge of Hope, a Malvern-based national Christian charity that guides homeless women with children into housing and financial security. He joined five members of his church, Ascension Lutheran in Willow Street, to form a group of “neighboring volunteers.” After completing online training, they began a two-year commitment in September to mentor a single mother and her three children in Lancaster.

“It’s not the haves helping the have-nots,” Ethan Dunnenberger explains. “We are all walking together, trying to navigate life.” For instance, Ethan Dunnenberger lost his health insurance, so he and the mother he helps searched online until they both found coverage.

Bridge of Hope offers a model that churches, shelters or other Christian groups can adapt, explains Anne Dunnenberger, Ethan’s mother and the charity’s national outreach director. The group provides a professional caseworker who helps create a pathway to self-sufficiency. Neighboring volunteers provide their own expertise plus a network of friends or co-workers who might know of an apartment or home available for rent, a person willing to donate a car, furniture, or a laptop, or someone to help create a budget.

For instance, Bridge of Hope may use donations to pay 100% of a family’s rent for the first month, then 75% the next month and so on until the mother can pay her rent and other expenses. Volunteers often help a mother move into a home, borrowing a truck and seeking families who want to donate a couch or a used laptop. They also help the woman find a job or complete training so she can work full time. They cook, babysit, offer computer help and call weekly to support and help solve problems.

“We help women build a healthy support system,” Anne Dunnenberger says.

Locally, eight families are working through the program, says Audrey Metzler, who directs the Lancaster branch of Bridge of Hope. The charity does not offer emergency or immediate housing; Metzler directs these women to shelters. The

application process usually takes a few weeks.

Women with dependent children must be homeless or face losing a home to qualify. Mothers also must be willing to work full time, remain drug and alcohol free, and be open to working with volunteers. Mothers may apply online, and the charity's website usually pops up during an internet search for rental assistance.

Nationally, some Bridge of Hope chapters also help fathers and their children. In Lancaster, though, the charity focuses on mothers because "they are the most vulnerable population," Metzler says. "We want to build a relationship of trust and friendship that lasts beyond Bridge of Hope."

That's exactly what happened with volunteers Lonita Englehart and Amy Stoltzfus, who joined a mentoring group at Pine Grove Church in Bowmansville.

"I knew I needed a family to take care of," recalls Englehart, whose only son died from pancreatic cancer in 2005. Englehart's marriage didn't survive the death, and the Chester County resident volunteered for Bridge of Hope. The charity matched Englehart with Katie Jones, now 28. Katie, whose five children range from 1 to 8 years old, recently graduated from the program.

However, Englehart has no plans to change their relationship.

"I can't see it ending," Englehart says. "I can't see turning my back on this family."

Englehart regularly babysits Jones' children, sometimes spending the night or arriving at 4 a.m. so Jones can leave for her job as a certified nursing assistant. "I can make a difference," she says.

So can volunteer Amy Stoltzfus, who lives near Morgantown. "We've developed trust," she says regarding Jones. "We are extending Christ's love."

For instance, Stoltzfus takes Jones' three older children to services at Pine Grove Church every other Sunday. She also regularly arranges play dates with Jones' kids for her own 6-year-old son, Caleb. The two mothers often talk on the phone. "We have a friendship."

Jones agrees. "I am so grateful for the help," she says about her neighboring volunteers. "They helped me get a vehicle and made meals and brought them to me." Jones' mother heard about Bridge of Hope from a friend and passed the information to her daughter. "I wanted to be financially stable and to do it on my own," says Jones, who rents a three-bedroom, one-bathroom home in Lancaster County.

Although Bridge of Hope once covered all of Jones' rent, the mother says she is proud that she can now pay for everything herself. She once worked in a hospital kitchen and then as a housekeeper before completing CNA training and finding a job at a nursing home. Her job provides a way for Jones to pass on the help she received

from Bridge of Hope.

“I like helping people,” she says. “I like taking care of the residents.”

Michelle Landis also likes taking care of people. The co-pastor of Living Light Mennonite Church in Washington Boro heads a group of five other congregants who have completed their training and are looking forward to meeting a woman who needs help. The pastor worked for Bridge of Hope about 15 years ago as a caseworker. Now, with young children, she wants to volunteer.

“I thought it would be really fun to get involved with a neighboring group,” Landis says.

Ethan Dunnenberger also has some definite ideas about volunteer fun as the temperatures rise. “I’m excited to be able to take the kids outdoors,” he says of the two boys and a girl who belong to the mother he mentors.

Then he becomes silent for a moment. “This is a very serious and important thing that we’re doing,” he says.

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Photo Credit:

Katie Jones, center, recently graduated from the Bridge of Hope program, which provides support to mothers in need. Volunteers Lonita Englehart, left, and Amy Stoltzfus, right, are seated in Jones’ East Cocalico home with Jones’ five children, from left: Julian Ford, 1, Makenna Jones, 3, Aubree Green, 8, Josiah Ford, 1, and Isaiah Shockley, 4. Stoltzfus’ son Caleb, 6, leans over the couch at far left.

BLAINE SHAHAN | Staff Photographer