

### More than a shelter

12/05/11

By Sharon Noguchi



*(Dai Sugano / Mercury News)*

With a food pantry, Internet-connected computers, a supervised homework center for children and furnished one-bedroom apartments, Redwood Family House offers conveniences, services and homey touches. Yet each of its nine resident families hopes to move out and never return.

The apartment building is one of six transitional housing complexes run by Shelter Network, which in its 34 years has saved tens of thousands of San Mateo County families from life on the streets. Combining education and training with encouragement and warmth, Shelter Network launches its clients back into permanent housing. "Graduating" from the program in Redwood City means a family has found a place of its own.

Elizabeth Joseph of Menlo Park is well on her way. A graduate of El Camino High School in South San Francisco, Joseph, 37, had never imagined herself homeless, until she suddenly was. For years, she had worked as a caregiver for a brain-injury patient. Then when her grandfather struggled with her ailing grandmother, Joseph moved in and cared for them both. After both died, Joseph had no job and no other relatives she could rely on to help her, and she found herself without a home.

A stay with her boyfriend's mother didn't last.

Last winter, Joseph was pregnant, and just before giving birth had to quit her part-time job at a department store.

She found a refuge at First Step for Families, the Shelter Network's emergency housing in San Mateo. After baby Avery was born in April, Joseph moved to Redwood Family Home. She said, "We were grateful to have a roof over our heads."

Like five other transitional homes run by Shelter Network, Redwood offers far more than just a roof. Residents must attend workshops on budgeting, save at least 50 percent of their income while living there — 75 percent is encouraged — and learn about résumé writing, job interviewing, parenting and nutrition.

"Financial literacy is very closely tied into our services," said the network's communications manager, Maria Duzon. "We want our clients to get into housing and stay there."

The average resident saves \$2,000 in four months, the maximum time residents can remain in the transitional housing.

And there are rules — a 6 p.m. weekday curfew, and daily chores. Drugs and alcohol are prohibited.

The result is that 93 percent of the shelter's family graduates find permanent housing in less than 100 days (the national average is 200 days). Among single graduates, the figure is 85 percent.

The network maintains 75 beds for single adults, and apartments for 84 families. "We could easily fill twice that," Duzon said. "We turn away far too many."

Among families, the majority become homeless because of a change in circumstances — most commonly, a family breakup or loss of a job. Many don't have enough savings to keep paying rent or a mortgage, which is why the shelter stresses financial and career planning.

Shelter Network set up Joseph with the social services program Calworks, which provided her food stamps and cash aid. She worked diligently on her résumé and sent out multiple job applications, said her caseworker, Ricardo Marta. "She's very attentive to small details," he said. She maintained a spotless apartment, Marta said, and has been a loving and conscientious mother. In September, she found a nearly full-time job at an assisted-living home, Brookdale Woodside Terrace, where she helps care for 20 elderly residents.

With the guidance offered by Shelter Network, Joseph, baby Avery and his dad, Orlando Vidal Salas III, found a room to rent in a Menlo Park apartment. Salas has a temporary job in food sales, and Joseph hopes he will



*Elizabeth Joseph plays with her 7-month-old baby, Avery. (Dai Sugano / Mercury News)*

find permanent work so the couple can move into their own apartment.

A spiritual person who practices Vajrayana Buddhism, Joseph said she tries to visualize light shining on people to alleviate their suffering. And to further her career, she plans to enroll in classes to earn her certified nursing assistant's certificate.

Caseworker Marta said, "She's very sweet, very peaceful."

Joseph said, "All we want in life is to try and improve our conditions and be harmonious and happy," Joseph said. Avery is her joy, she said. "He inspires me to keep on working, to be happy and be a good person and improve."

Shelter Network runs on \$8 million annually, but its federal and state revenue is declining as government budgets shrink, so it appeals increasingly to the public.

Wish Book readers can help Shelter Network assist more clients like Elizabeth Joseph. [Each donation of \\$100](#) will house, feed and clothe a family for one night.

[Each donation of \\$50](#) will enable Joseph to buy more nursing uniforms for her job or buy baby Avery some Christmas presents. [Donations of \\$75](#) would go toward making needed repairs to her car.

Shelter Network also needs donations of diapers, new or gently used bedding, kitchenware and other household items.

For more information on Shelter Network, go to [www.shelternetwork.org](http://www.shelternetwork.org)

## HOW TO HELP

[Each \\$100 donation](#) to Shelter Network will house, feed and clothe a family for one night

[Each \\$50 donation](#) will help Joseph and baby Avery

[Each \\$75 donation](#) will go toward making needed repairs to her car