

had one ask so far, but I can't put children...with a bunch of men," says Mary Lee haltingly. The poor dads have to stay separated from their wives and kids in the men's dorms downstairs. There is a locked door on the staircase between the two floors.

There are only two bathrooms in the entire building. "So they have to work together especially when you have all those kids that need baths, getting ready for school... You don't go in there and take an hour long shower because there's someone waiting to come in... all the time. So, mornings are fun."

So, how in the world do they pay for all this? Mary Lee smiles and gives the short answer: "By the grace of God." The long answer to this question takes us into a fascinating underground network of churches, service organizations, businesses and individuals all committed to selfless anonymous giving, volunteerism and cooperation. And *THAT* is the true miracle on Madison Road.

The government has little to do with it, other than a reimbursement grant from the Department of Housing and Community Development. That only provides one fourth of their yearly operating budget of \$360,000, which is nothing when you think of all that they do. "If we had to rely on the government to keep us running, we wouldn't be here," smirks Mary Lee.

Instead, she begs, borrows, and barter. Sounding like a character from Oliver Twist she says "I'm the beggar. I'm the person that goes to all the churches and the Kiwanis...That's my job. I go from church to church, to the Ruritans. Anyone that will let me come talk, I go talk, so that they know. And then that keeps the money coming in and this place open."

She praises the Department of Social Services with whom she has a longstanding cooperative relationship. She mentions Americare which provides training for people to become certified nurse's assistants. She praises individual businesses like American Woodmark for their cash donations.

But it really boils down to individuals. "It's people...people," she repeats for emphasis. "We hold fundraisers every other month. We just did a silent auction and we had over 100 items donated by people. We made over \$8,000 which is really good for a fundraiser." Darn tootin'.

And all of their food has been donated this year. "We have not had to spend a penny on groceries." It comes instead from "churches, individuals; people will call and say 'what do you need this month or this week,

and they'll bring it. If I say 'milk, sugar, butter,' it's here in an hour."

She even cobbles together bartering deals such as this exchange with the Food Bank. "They got huge

they don't. Still, she wants more. "I'm greedy," she grins craftily.

Last year, they discovered bed bugs in the dormitories! "So we pulled out all the wood beds, scrubbed all the rooms down and had the pest control come...*again*...and then we put in all metal beds that were donated by the churches here in Orange...\$10,000 worth of beds." The Dave Mathews Band philanthropic arm gave them \$6,000 to redo their plumbing. "The basement never had hot water, which meant the guys were taking cold showers, and to wash dishes by boiling water, it was terrible." Now they have a real dishwasher.

And what about expenses? Just heating oil costs \$1,100 a month. "It's an old building. It needs a new roof. But I can't write a grant to get a new roof because I don't own the building; the county does. It lets us have it for a dollar a year."

Not long ago, Sheltering Arms borrowed \$30,000 from the county so she could pay bills before she was reimbursed by the government grant. That loan is due a week from tomorrow. "Now the reimbursement money is coming in and most of that will go to the county and the rest will pay my bills. Then I can get more coming in."

She's hoping for a new building. She presses her palms together in prayer and looks heavenward. But Mary Lee Hensel is realistic enough to know it won't just appear under the tree tomorrow morning. It's going to take hard work to make that miracle happen. "Two years...I wish...I'm hoping...I'm praying."

She tells a story about a couple with seven children. The husband worked in Woodbridge as an engineer. "He had a good job, but lost it due to cutbacks."

Things got worse. "It ended up they lost their house; couldn't drive back and forth to Woodbridge...They ended up... taking all their kids...to Social Services... and putting them in foster care... so they could save their money and... get their kids back." Her eyes moisten; her voice quavers.

She pauses, composes herself, and then brightens. "They got 'em back two weeks ago... but they went four months without all their kids...every...single...kid! Seven kids....Can you imagine having to give your kids up for four months while you got back on your feet?" She sobs softly. "To get their kids back before Christmas, to me that just...I just bawled when they called."

Just another miracle on 454 Madison Road.



Photo by Phil Audibert

A brand new resident at Sheltering Arms, Matthew towers over Mary Lee Hensel (left) and staffer Bernice Washington. Bernice is scheduled to be on duty Christmas morning. She also doubles as a "job-finder" for the shelter's residents.



Photo by Phil Audibert

Families get their own bedroom. Women and children are together, but the dads must sleep downstairs in the men's dorm.

boxes of fish that wasn't individually wrapped. They couldn't use it, so we took the fish; we give them canned goods...We're always back and forth so we can help each other out. They would have had to throw that food away. I can use bulk food because I'm usually feeding 30, 40 people." She has the freezer space;



With his possessions stacked next to him, "Matthew" fills out reams of paperwork to become a resident at Sheltering Arms. Christmas morning, there will be a couple of presents for him under this tree.

Photo by Phil Audibert

## Miracle on 454 Madison Road

Down in the trenches of a homeless shelter, miracles, like opportunities, rarely happen; they are created...by hard work. Lady Luck helps, but even she will not pay you a visit unless you make the effort.

At 454 Madison Road in Orange, mini miracles are created every day. Here's just one: "We have a woman... here right now... with her two children," says Sheltering Arms' Executive Director, Mary Lee Hensel. "She went... through the nurse's assistant course." Mary Lee speaks haltingly in rapid fire bursts. "She's moving out...this weekend...into an apartment.

Her kids... were having a real hard time in school... when she started. And now they're thrilled...to be bringing good grades home to mom. She's back on her feet...doing great... I cannot foresee her having any problems when she's on her own."

This woman went from homeless and helpless to a self-sufficient contributing member of our community in just 90 days. That's a miracle.



Photo by Phil Audibert

Ironically, the goal at the shelter is to get you to exit back to the everyday world of having a job and a place to live.

Then there are the anti-miracles, the residents who won't get a job, who bounce along from one homeless shelter to another. "And the sad part about it is most of them have kids," snaps Mary Lee. "The kids are in three or four school districts in a year...every year. Try to educate that child! A lot of them...that's the way they were raised. If your mom took you from shelter to shelter to shelter, and lived off the government then..." Mary Lee lets you complete the sentence for yourself.

As abusers beget abusers, so do the homeless beget the homeless.

The vast majority of her residents, however, are here as a last resort. "Right now it is typically mom, dad and kids and they've both lost their jobs, or mom has been staying at home with the kids and dad lost his job." Foreclosures? "Lot's of them lately," she confirms. "Where it used to be a lot of bi-polar people, we still get those, but now its families. It's a lot of single mothers trying to raise their kids who have lost their job...You know they go paycheck to paycheck as it is. We've had teachers; we've had every profession you can think of. It takes just one huge illness in your family to wipe out your savings, and you can lose your house."

Mary Lee came to this nitty gritty world three years ago well-qualified with a background in business management, teaching and missionary work. "I was always a day away from this. Being a single mom is rough. But I always had a job, sometimes two."

She is seated behind a desk in her cluttered office. The carpet is stained. The hastily erected shelves sag from the weight of all manner of stuff from spare blankets to file boxes, from children's toys to office supplies. Inspirational religious sayings are randomly taped to the wall. She peers into an aging laptop and clicks and keystrokes her way through a photo library of what you might call Sheltering Arms' "Family Photos." She has seen it all; the good, the bad, the ugly.

She and six staffers keep this place running on a wing, a prayer, and some duct tape 24-7, 365

days a year. They provide three meals a day, a roof and a warm bed for as many as 43 men, women, and children to whom Lady Luck has not paid a visit, either because they couldn't help themselves or they wouldn't help themselves.

Christmas morning, Bernice Washington will preside over the distribution of presents to all the residents, including at least two children. "They get hats, gloves, socks, things they need, toiletries, things like that," says Mary Lee. "The kids all get presents.... We make a list and make sure everyone gets something."



Photo by Phil Audibert

There's one TV in the upstairs women's and children's lounge at Sheltering Arms. Deciding what channel to watch is an exercise in group dynamics.



Photo by Phil Audibert

Every scrap of food served at Sheltering Arms this past year has been donated, by churches, service organizations, businesses and individuals. Meals are served in a communal dining room downstairs.

Then, Washington, who doubles as the job-finder fairy, will fix breakfast for everybody who is here, perhaps pancakes. And for Christmas dinner she'll roast one or two of the several donated turkeys. The next day, Boxing Day, the residents will trudge off to their jobs or their job interviews. And the children, well, there's not much for them to do, other than hang out in the parking lot. There's no playground. "It's a busy parking lot," shudders Mary Lee. "You have Mental Health and the Health Department, people zipping through all the time. So, it's scary."

On school days, of course, the kids catch the bus. A staffer "makes sure they've had their shots, they've been to the dentist, that they get right back into school. We work with other school districts so that if you're from Madison, your kid can keep going to Madison; he doesn't have to change schools because of the situation." And that holds true within the county as well. If your kids are going to Locust Grove Elementary, they'll try to bus them to Locust Grove instead of Orange Elementary. "We try not to disturb the kid's life as much as possible."

Still, the stigma of being homeless, the loss of dignity, takes its toll. Homeless high school students step off the bus at Sheetz. They don't want their peers to know that they live in a homeless shelter. Still, Mary Lee says, the "other" kids "all know."

Sheltering Arms is the last safety net. It is about as far away as you can get from a black-tie, gala charity fundraiser. It has been here for the past 11 years, yet Mary Lee still hears the comment, "I didn't know we even had a homeless shelter." For obvious reasons, "This year it has been pretty much non-stop, full house."

To become a resident you have to be felony-free within the past 10 years and willing to fill out reams of paperwork and provide some kind of proof that you are indeed homeless, such as a bank foreclosure document or an eviction notice from a landlord. That buys you 45 days free room and board, albeit in a dormitory, at Sheltering Arms. But if you're not trying to create your miracle within the first two weeks, Mary Lee and her staff will notice.

"They HAVE to get a job, and we'll help them find a job," she intones. "Granted it may be McDonald's or Burger King or Food Lion, but it's a job. It's better than nothing. But if they don't want to work, they have to go somewhere else. We're here to help you get back on your feet not give you a free ride." Asked if she's been taken advantage of, Mary Lee shrugs knowingly and says, "Oh yeah." Then she softens and adds, "If we have a room and someone needs it, we let them have it. We don't turn anyone away because of where they're from."

A look at a pie chart shows that of the 287 residents at Sheltering Arms in 2008, only 56 came from Orange



Contributed photo

Sheltering Arms Executive Director, Mary Lee Hensel (right) and the Rev. Dr. Denise Hall load up the shelter's brand new dishwasher donated by Orange Presbyterian Church. Before, staffers were washing dishes by hand. Coming from a business management, teaching and missionary background, Mary Lee Hensel is well-qualified to deal with the various aspects of running a homeless shelter.

County. The rest came from neighboring counties and even far away counties like Prince William. There's an explanation for this. Louisa has no shelter. Madison has a transitional house, but no actual shelter. And Culpeper only has shelters for abused women, veterans, and women and children. "They won't do families; they won't do men. We do all." Mary Lee is looking into trying to hit up some of these counties for some money.

While you are a guest at Sheltering Arms you have 21 days to bring home a pay check. And when you get it, you must turn it over to them. They take 70 percent and put it into a savings account that you cannot access. The remaining 30 percent, you keep for yourself. "Every homeless person has a cell phone," says Mary Lee in bewilderment. "I don't know how they do it. Most of them smoke. So, that's coming out of their money, where they could be saving it instead."

At the end of 45 days, they take a look at what you've done. "If you've been here and found a job and you've saved your money and did your chores and did everything that you were supposed to, you can stay here 90 days." By that point Mary Lee says residents usually have saved \$1,000. "When they're ready to go, they get all of their money back." They can then move into a rent-free apartment in a transitional house on Main Street where they only have to pay 15 percent of their income to cover utilities. "So, they can save a lot of money especially if there's two of them and they're both working."

She conducts a tour of this cramped, two-story, somewhat frayed and tattered shelter on Madison Road. It is

an odd mix of institution and home. Little signs dot the walls reminding residents to clean up after themselves. Glaring exit signs in the narrow dark hallway point the way out, which ironically is the goal here. A child's stuffed toy lies keeled over on an institutional metal bunk bed. The lone ladies bathroom is painted hot pink floor to ceiling. Plants donated by the garden club flourish in the sunny reception area along with the Christmas tree. Yet padlocks on all the locker doors remind you that this is indeed a homeless shelter. If you want to keep what little you have, you'd better keep it under lock and key.

"They make friends here. It's like a small family," continues Mary Lee as we peer into the upstairs TV room. "Or, they make enemies too, if someone rubs them wrong. It's just like brothers and sisters." Arguments over what channel to watch are resolved the same way they are in any large family. "Most of our residents, if they have family, they have worn...out...their...welcome...by not wanting to work, not wanting to contribute, not wanting to help," says Mary Lee knowingly.

"And the family has said, 'I've had enough,' especially when there are bi-polar issues. That makes it worse... They're rough for us to han-

dle because we have to make sure they get their meds. They have to go to their appointments. They can be very aggressive and nasty to other residents, some of them, if they're not taking their medication the way they are supposed to. We don't have nurses on staff to make sure they do. We have to trust them."

At Sheltering Arms, women and children live on the top floor which is ground-level, street side. Men live in dormitories in the basement, which opens to the back side. Mary Lee smiles and says staffers have caught single women sneaking out their dorm window to go visit the men and vice versa. "Oh yeah," she shrugs. "You know; they're human."

Sheltering Arms provides help in many other areas besides finding jobs and

providing transportation to job interviews. They have hosted parenting and budgeting classes; a nutritionist "teaches them how to cook on a budget, to eat well even though you have little money for food; anything that will help them do better."

They even provide some counseling. "We have women who seem to have bad taste in men and always go towards the abusive kind of man or the man that doesn't want to work but wants you to work and bring home the money."

That leads, of course to the abused women's shelter, which this is not. That's a separate facility, and not even Mary Lee knows where it is located. Still, sometimes women turn up on her doorstep who belong there. "I call them and they will come here. I don't go there. I don't want to know."

There are plenty of house rules at Sheltering Arms. Of course, no drugs or alcohol. "We have a breathalyzer and we'll use it." Also, no knives or weapons of any kind. In fact residents who carry box cutters for their jobs, must check them at the door.

"Keep it clean," continues Mary Lee, ticking off the rules list. "No swearing; too many kids. I don't want them to hear it. They all have chores; empty the trash. No smoking indoors." So, they all go out the front door and congregate at a little patio under a tree. "It looks like a bunch of bums," is a complaint she frequently hears from passersby. "Well, that's the only property we own is right under the tree, so we're praying for a new building. It's very tight in here."

A typical day starts with breakfast at 7 a.m., followed by lunch at 1 p.m., although many pack their own lunch to take to work to save money. Dinner is at 6 p.m. Everyone eats downstairs in a communal dining room with folding chairs and tables with plastic table cloths. Everyone, other than those with night jobs, has to be in by 9 p.m. Lights out at 10 p.m. One of the staffers combs the newspaper every week to find out where free events are happening so they don't go raving mad with boredom. High school football, basketball and baseball games are well attended by the homeless.

"All kids have to stay with their moms, which means, we can't take (single) men with children now...I've only



Contributed photo

A volunteer for a local home schooling organization, Aaron Chunner serves up a plate of cookies at the recent silent auction for Sheltering Arms held at Waugh Enterprises. The fundraiser netted \$8,000 for the homeless shelter.