



...a publication highlighting our work to help low-income families achieve independence.

**A message from the President...**

Dear Friends,

The holidays are upon us—a time of celebration and cheer when we give thanks for the many blessings bestowed upon us and our families. It is a time for drawing together and evaluating our priorities. A time to reaffirm what is truly meaningful to us: family, health, friendship, service.

Regardless of how each of us observes the holidays, one constant remains: this is a time for children. We experience the joy and excitement of the season through their eyes. We want to shower them with gifts, as a way of showing our love. For many parents, the most difficult challenge is deciding between the newest Wii game and an iPhone. Very often, our decision comes down to which of the most popular games and toys our child already owns.

But the holidays also remind us of the 1.5 million homeless children in America whose parents don't have that decision to make. These children lack not only toys, but often basic necessities like clothing, food and a bed of their own. For many, Christmas is not a time of joyful abundance but, rather, a reminder of how much they do without each day.

At Family Promise, more than 2,000 guests will share the holiday experience this year in our networks and more than half of them will be children. Thanks to our volunteers, they will enjoy trees, parties and festive meals. Children will open their own presents when they wake up on Christmas morning. They will be surrounded by people who care, who realize just how precious these moments and memories will be.

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## Struggling Economy Presents New Challenges

Families seeking shelter are knocking on the doors of Family Promise Affiliates in numbers not seen in our organization's 21-year history. No corner of the country is immune from job losses, wage cuts and unaffordable rents. Waiting lists are lengthening and families' needs are deepening.

"The situation here is dire," says Leslie Frost, Executive Director of our Affiliate in Minneapolis. Staff there field at least 300 phone calls a month from homeless families. "It's very grim."

In response to the growing demand for services, Family Promise staff and volunteers are devising innovative ways to serve struggling families such as developing mentoring programs, collaborating with agencies to provide transitional and affordable housing, and offering continued support for guest families who have found housing after a stay in an IHN.

"It's very frustrating for everyone," said Julie Steiner, Executive Director of an IHN in Washtenaw County, Michigan, where the recession hit five years ago and 15 percent of adults collect unemployment benefits. Thanks to a bequest from a concerned resident, the IHN now has a counselor helping families on the IHN's growing waiting list. She tries to prevent evictions and connects families with social services and job openings.

### **Affiliates see changes in the families they serve.**

John McDowell, Executive Director of the Family Promise



*Laura Kaplan reads with a young guest.*

Affiliate in Roanoke Valley, Virginia, says more of the families they serve are two-parent families, a change he attributes to the weakened economy that has caused both job loss and a reduction in work hours.

And in Michigan, Steiner says the families she serves are more fragile psychologically. "The families are in much worse shape. They have very few emotional reserves. Many haven't worked in more than a year. There's a lot of depression, a lot of anxiety."

Laura Kaplan, Executive Director of our Southbridge, Massachusetts Affiliate, echoed that experience. "We're definitely seeing an increase, especially an increase in extremely poor."

### **The solutions to these growing needs are as varied as the challenges families now face.**

In Southbridge, the IHN is working on developing affordable housing, thanks to a technical assistance grant funded by the federal

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## President's Message

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One in every 50 children in America will experience homelessness this year. These children are learning at far too young an age how hard life can be. Never are the effects of poverty and homelessness upon children more evident than during the holidays. A child opening gifts or listening to a story—wide-eyed with wonder—in a grandparent's lap on Christmas Eve reminds us of just how magical those days of innocence truly can be. No child should be without that innocence.

Family Promise's work is driven by the spirit of compassion and the belief that all children deserve a home. The holiday season is just one example of the work that is carried on throughout the year, enabling countless families to get back on their feet and into homes of their own. This outpouring of goodwill from our donors, volunteers and staffs is what makes Family Promise unique, and I want to thank all of you for your generosity and dedication over this past year.

Sincerely,



Karen Olson  
President

## Our Promise to Children Event a Success

**F**riends and supporters of Family Promise gathered for a fundraising breakfast at Baltusrol Golf Club in Springfield, NJ on November 10. Over 200 people attended the one-hour program entitled *Our Promise to Children*, an educational and inspirational appeal for support in the fight against family homelessness.

The program opened with the heartbreaking recordings of homeless families calling Family Promise Affiliates in search of help, followed by the debut of our new video, *Our Families, Our Future*, showcasing children's perceptions of the IHN experience. Family Promise President, Karen Olson, spoke movingly about the rising tide of family homelessness, its effects upon children, and how Family Promise helps communities mobilize to help those in need.

Our sincere thanks go out to all who contributed to help make this wonderful event happen.

**Perhaps the highlight of the entire event was the testimony of Heather Chester, a former guest of Family Promise's Cape May Affiliate. She movingly shared the story of her struggles as a single mom to raise her 3 children in the face of daunting challenges. At her lowest point, with nowhere left to turn, she picked up a Family Promise brochure and called the number inside. She spent 3 months in the program and is now working as a certified nurses' assistant and will be moving into her own house at the end of November. Heather's presence put a name and a face to the issue of family homelessness across the country and her account of her personal journey had a profound emotional impact upon all who were there. ■**



*Heather Chester shares her story.*

## Struggling Economy Presents New Challenges

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stimulus funds. It also encourages its partner congregations to contribute to local food pantries while the Society of St. Vincent de Paul donates clothes, furniture and other necessities to needy families. "By collaborating, we're reducing duplication of services," Kaplan said. "We're getting more help to more people."

The Northern Kentucky IHN bought, remodeled and will open three transitional living apartments this winter, asking partner

congregations to furnish and decorate the units. The IHN is starting a Family Mentoring program and expects its first group of mentors-mentees to start in January.

In Minneapolis, Frost says staff is spending more time helping guest families get on their feet. She cited one guest who found herself homeless again, despite having worked toward a medical transcriptionist's certificate, and always paying her rent on time. Her landlord had turned off the water in

his rental apartments—and his own phone—when he couldn't pay his bills. The single mother found housing again, thanks to the Herculean efforts of staff, who negotiated with Section 8 landlords, put together her housing application, and helped her to finally move to an affordable-housing unit. Said Frost, "We will do whatever it takes to help families find housing." ■

# Peddling With a Promise

## Family Promise of Muskegon County, Michigan

One thousand seventy miles is a long way to drive. Heck, it's a pretty long way to fly. But when Gil Boersma left his house this past May to travel such a distance, he didn't grab his car keys or his plane ticket. Gil hopped on his bicycle.

On July 20, some nine weeks later, the "peddling pastor" from Muskegon, Michigan huffed his way back into the northern timber town from a grueling but glorious odyssey he will forever cherish.

As if the physical achievement weren't significant enough, what projected this passage to even greater heights was the fact that Gil peddled with an extra special "promise" in mind—more specifically, Family Promise. His remarkable ride spanning the perimeter of Lake Michigan helped generate funding for the forthcoming launch of Family Promise of Muskegon County.

"It all begins with the fact that I had been contemplating retirement," he explained. "I felt like there were more creative matters in mind for me as I was about to turn 60." Gil happened upon an article in a community newsletter requesting fundraising ideas. It dawned upon him that he could combine his ride with his call to service.

"I think everyone agreed this was a compelling platform for community awareness," Gil said. "My preference of Family Promise was rooted in the fact that it touched upon so many critical issues and gathered people of all walks of life to embrace the process of recovery and renewal."

Within a short span, the word began to spread. Local papers to national ecumenical publications ardently told the tale of the peddling pastor. Soon enough, donations also began filtering in.



*Paster Boersma contemplates the crossing.*

But as progress was being made back home, Gil Boersma was busy battling the physical effects of his rather extreme expedition. Besides the dramatic winds and weather patterns, his bike was packed with seven bags bearing 45 pounds worth of basic necessities. Not to mention, this was a solo ride—no teammates, no trailer, no pep talks.

"It was a goal that looked like a mountain when I started out, and it felt like the mountain grew as I made my way," he admitted. "I had some minor injuries with pretty serious fatigue and it was hard camping at night when I felt entirely worn. Eventually, I had to ditch the majority of bags and spend nights in small inns or accommodations offered by friends along the route."

Though he would never assume to compare his test to the arduous scope of homelessness, Gil's long, solitary cycling journey also afforded him a glimpse into what it felt like to be without a home of one's own. He too was living in the present, peddling one mile at a time, one hour



*Approaching the Mackinac Bridge.*

at a time, one day at a time.

Now, several months removed from Pastor Boersma's return, well over \$6,000 has poured in from compassionate souls who heard about the peddling pastor and the organization for which he made his way. A team of volunteers has finished laying the floor of the Family Promise Day Center and it is now bustling with moms and dads and children, working to extricate themselves from the web of poverty and homelessness.

But more work remains. As Gil says, "I continue to be further inspired into service by the example that both Family Promise and this community have built—a model of open hearts, open minds and open doors." ■

## Family Promise

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Family Promise® is a national volunteer-based nonprofit organization founded on the belief that Americans are compassionate people who want to make a difference. We are committed to help low-income and homeless families reclaim and maintain independence through our five program areas: Interfaith Hospitality Networks provide shelter, meals and support services to homeless families; Family Mentoring provides trained volunteers to assist low-income families; Just Neighbors educates communities about poverty; Community Initiatives foster the development of programs that prevent homelessness; and Voices Uniting supports initiatives to promote economic stability for low income families.

## WORDS OF GRATITUDE

Thank you. These words are simple ones. When they are meant they mean everything. When my family arrived in this program it was Christmas Eve. I was working 12-hour shifts and tired in every sense of the word. We walked in and were immediately welcomed like we belonged there, my kids were given gifts and Christmas was really Christmas for them. Thank you!

My daughter's birthday was while we were with LIHN. She received her own little party and she felt so special! Thank you. For the time you spent, the food you cooked and the jokes you told. Leaving this program is a bittersweet day. Sweet because we reached our goals—a better job, my child is in a better school and we have a new home! Bitter because we leave behind some truly wonderful people we met during the journey. Just know all the times you just sit and listen, share a smile, dry tears and hug kids means the world and makes a difference. Thank you.

Sandra L., Guest Family

## Join Us in Orlando for Our 10th National Conference



**Date:** April 30- May 2, 2010

**Location:** Orlando, Florida at the Doubletree Hotel,  
5780 Major Blvd.

**Early Bird Registration Fee:** \$255 (after March 31, rate goes up to \$305)

**Room Rate:** \$119 per night, single to quad

## Welcoming our new Affiliates...

Blount County, Tennessee  
Mahoning Valley, Ohio  
Monroe, Louisiana  
Volusia County, Florida  
Lake Houston, Texas  
Delaware County, Ohio  
Forsyth County, NC  
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