Renewing the Promise, 20 Years Later

New Jersey Governor Jon Corzine delivered opening remarks at this year’s Family Promise National Conference in Morristown, New Jersey, an event marked by a milestone 20 years of service. He articulated his experience with the organization as a “remarkable example of faith-based initiatives,” representing “the very best concept of hospitality.”

The Governor also proclaimed that homelessness continues to “atomize individuals and cause a cycle of social breakdown that needs to be defeated once and for all.”

The duality of his remarks aptly echoed the event’s official theme — “Celebrating Achievements, Renewing Our Promise.” There was time to be joyful. There was time to be mindful. But by all accounts, efforts to renew the “promise” were in full view throughout the dynamic three-day forum.

Over 300 Family Promise Affiliate directors, staff members, board members, congregational leaders and former guest families modestly acknowledged the fact that their concerted efforts have transformed one quarter of a million lives since inception.

Attendees were also keenly mindful of the myriad trials that lie before them. Education and networking sessions addressed challenges and choices ranging from potential strategic partnerships to policy initiatives on affordable housing, healthcare and jobs.

The renowned Reverend Dr. James Forbes of New York City’s famed Riverside Church delivered a rousing discourse on how the right balance of community and spirituality can move us through history toward a brighter future. He peered into a rapt audience and declared, “A new America is coming – I can see it in your eyes.”

Best-selling author and lifelong education advocate Jonathan Kozol lamented how social and educational...
Family Promise and Habitat for Humanity Team Up With a Common Goal

In communities across the country, low-income and homeless families will benefit from a closer relationship between Family Promise and Habitat for Humanity International. Driven by common goals and compassion for those in need of shelter, the two headquarters are working together to assist families in need and reach out to the wider community to educate others about how they can help their neighbors.

Family Promise’s 136 affiliates will be encouraged to partner with one of more than 1,500 Habitat for Humanity affiliates in the United States to educate and mobilize faith communities and the general public about poverty issues. “We’ve had a long-standing relationship with Habitat, from training volunteers to helping families secure Habitat housing,” says Karen Olson, President of Family Promise, “and we’re thrilled that this cooperation can make such a difference for our communities.”

Family Promise has already teamed up with some local Habitat for Humanity affiliates to serve families throughout the country. In Warren County, N.J., for instance, Habitat volunteers helped rehabilitate the day center for the new Family Promise affiliate. In Greenville, S.C., the Greenville Area Interfaith Hospitality Network, a program of Family Promise, is joining forces with the local Habitat affiliate to provide complementary services: Habitat will build transitional housing funded by GAIHN, and GAIHN will provide ongoing family support services for Habitat families.

Habitat affiliates have been using the faith-based Just Neighbors toolkit (a Family Promise product) for years: training staff and volunteers, educating board members, recruiting congregations and even fundraising. Bob Johnson, formerly of the Global Faith Engagement department for Habitat for Humanity International and now a Family Promise consultant, explains, “Just Neighbors is an excellent tool for informing minds, inspiring hearts and encouraging hands to action.”

In October, Just Neighbors was part of the training curriculum for 500 AmeriCorps and Vista members, and work is underway to develop a Community Service Edition and Habitat-specific study guides for the program. One AmeriCorps member from Philadelphia said, “I am more likely to continue in activism and service after AmeriCorps because of Just Neighbors than any other experience this year.”

Welcoming our new affiliates …

LORAIN COUNTY, OH
COEUR D’ALENE, ID
MONROE COUNTY, PA
WARREN COUNTY, NJ
SEATTLE, WA
BEAUFORT, SC
LEWISTON, ID
NATICK, MA
COLLEGE STATION, TX
SOUTH PALM BEACH COUNTY, FL

“Just Neighbors was part of the training curriculum for 500 AmeriCorps and Vista members.”
Family Promise of Las Vegas Director Terry Lindemann was surprised by a phone call she received this past spring from a family service case manager working for the state of Michigan. The woman was about to retire, she told Terry, but had to try just one more time to find the birth son of a woman who’d contacted her. Thanks to the Internet, and by way of Family Promise, she’d found him.

One of the first families Terry had worked with when she joined the Affiliate in 2004 was Mitchell, his wife Theresa, and their son Jerod. They’d been guests of the IHN for three months, and moved into their own apartment with help from the network staff and volunteers. The family stayed in touch with Terry, participating in mentoring and other programs, and Theresa helped out as a volunteer. Even after leaving the IHN program, the services and support from the Affiliate were “awesome,” says Mitchell, and invaluable as the family got back on its feet.

After their stay, Mitchell wrote a thank-you letter to Family Promise, grateful for the compassionate support his family received. “If we didn’t have that kind of help,” he recounts, “we would have been spiraling and we would be homeless again.” With his permission, his thank-you was posted on the Affiliate’s website. By chance, the case worker in Michigan found the note online, and, because they’d stayed in touch, Terry knew just where to find Mitchell.

This past May, accompanied by his adoptive parents, Mitchell finally met his birth mother, Barbara. “I’d always wondered where I came from,” he says, “not so much for myself, but for my children,” including Jerod and young daughters Sabrina and Josephine. That wondering is over, and Mitchell and his family are now in regular contact with Barbara.

Terry gets tears in her eyes, she says, when she remembers how often he used to talk about finding his mother. Family Promise “not only assisted Mitchell and his family with finding a place called home,” Terry says, but “through our ability to stay connected with our families over the years and the wonder of the Internet, a lifelong dream has come true for mother and son.”

The conference provided priceless opportunities for give-and-take among attendees. For as different as each Family Promise community is, the Affiliates share many of the same struggles and successes. “The amazing thing about Family Promise is that it brings together people who care from so many different traditions and backgrounds,” observed Rachel Falkove, director of the Northwest Philadelphia IHN. “We have such an opportunity to motivate people, to whatever degree they can help.”

Family Promise Founder and President Karen Olson closed the conference with a moving keynote addressing the very essence of voluntarism. In reflecting over twenty years of achievement, Karen remarked that “the real celebration must always lie in the continuation and perfection of essential work every day hereafter.”

The Power of the Family Promise Network

Family Promise Board Member Robert Hugin addressing attendees.

The Family Promise Choir rehearsing for the Sunday Interfaith Worship Service.

Especially fascinating were plenary and workshop sessions in which former guests recounted their successful journeys through the Interfaith Hospitality Program. C.J., Cynthia and Regina have since graduated to lives no longer defined by their former homelessness. Each woman is now an active advocate on behalf of Family Promise, working to “break the cycle” for the next generation, as Cynthia noted, to “train them in a different way.”

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Family Promise

EDITOR: Marybeth Reynolds
CONTRIBUTING WRITERS:
Doug Forbes  Terry Lindemann
Frank McCann
LAYOUT: Sahlman Art Studio

PHONE: 908-273-1100
FAX: 908-273-0030
EMAIL: info@familypromise.org
WEB: www.familypromise.org

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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 Public Policy supports initiatives to promote economic stability for low income families.

SAVE THE DATE!

Family Promise 6th Annual Spring Event
Baltusrol Golf Club
Friday, May 1st • 7-10pm
Cocktails, Buffet and Auction