

LITTLE ROCK
SOIRÉE N°10

OUR HOUSE *offers*
HOPE

COVER STORY / PG. 14

A CHILD *shall*
LEAD

them. / A FAMILY
THANKFUL FOR ARKANSAS
CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL.

FEATURE STORY / PG. 58



SNEAK PEEK!



web video series launch
CHEFS DISH IT OUT

SOIRÉE RECOMMENDS VIDEOS / PG. 98

/gifts to **.64**
give
OR RECEIVE
HUBBUB / PG. 11

a place to
{ LAND }

georgia MJARTAN | executive director of OUR HOUSE

by becki MOORE

AT 15 GEORGIA MJARTAN'S FIRST JOB WAS AS A LIFEGUARD AT A LOCAL LAKE. AT 28 SHE IS STILL A LIFEGUARD OF SORTS, RESCUING HOMELESS FAMILIES AND INDIVIDUALS FROM SEEMINGLY HOPELESS SITUATIONS.

"As the executive director of Our House, I am a witness to change and life transformation every day in my work. We are so much more than a shelter," she said. "Our House gives homeless people the boost they need to become successful – in the workplace, in the community and in their own families."

Our House is the only program in the state of Arkansas that offers housing for all types of families, including single fathers with children, married couples with children, single mothers with children and individuals without children. While many other homeless programs offer services to a specific population (women and children only, victims of domestic violence, single men or veterans), Our House is open to anyone who is homeless and is willing and able to work. This is a key component of the program.

The Our House shelter's one-stop model has been so successful that its programs have been replicated in 39 states and have garnered national recognition in the Wall Street Journal and by two United States Presidents (George Bush Sr. and Bill Clinton).

"Our House is a long-term program with the expectation that our clients will not return – that Our House will be their last stop on their journey out of homelessness," she said. "Many homeless shelters provide short term 'emergency shelter' for individuals in need and end up seeing the same clients month after month. That's what we call the revolving door syndrome. That doesn't happen at Our House. People are required to get jobs (and we help them do that), we teach them to save money, we build them up through education and training programs so that by the time they leave Our House, they are able to make it on their own.

"For us, it's not about counting bodies in beds. We know we are successful when our residents get jobs, save money

and move up the housing ladder – out of shelter and into permanent housing. Last year, 76% of our clients found full-time, permanent employment and put money in savings. And, 77% of the people who left our transitional housing program moved into permanent housing. In other words, last year Our House successfully enabled 750 people to start a new life for themselves, to become successful, to be able to support their families and to be contributing members of our community."

Mjartan tells us about a young woman who never graduated from high school and couldn't pay her rent on the little money she could make working in fast food. She was depressed and down on herself.

"In just a few months in our program, she not only got training to get a better job and to take her GED – she found purpose. Two years later, she stopped by Our House to tell me how good her life is today – how she has her own place and a steady job working as the head teacher at a daycare center. She told me with pride, 'You know how you made us save our money when we were living at Our House? Well, guess what, Miss Georgia, I still do that! I put away \$100 a month. That's for my kids so they can go to college,'" Mjartan said.

Our House is one of several local nonprofit organizations in a fundraising effort. "We are in the middle of a \$400,000 capital campaign," she said, "and we are a third of the way there." These funds will be used to completely renovate the Family Housing buildings, where over 150 homeless children and families live each year. We need community support for this campaign. We also need volunteers, specifically people who can commit to ongoing service. Every one of the children in our after-school program needs help with his or her homework. So every day, we need tutors to work with the kids after school. No matter what you do, there is a way for you to help out. I just encourage people to give me a call to find out how, 374-7383, ext. 201.

"As the economy took a nose dive, we saw our numbers go way up. We have seen a significant increase in the number of families who are coming into our program. People who were just [barely] making it before, but now they can't afford to get to their job because of the cost of gas. Or they lost that second job and now they can't afford childcare," she said. "When you're



“I AM A WITNESS TO
change & life
TRANSFORMATION
EVERYDAY.”

living paycheck to paycheck, you are very sensitive to what happens in the economy. It has a big impact. At the same time as demand for our services is increasing, our donors are feeling less comfortable to give. They are watching their pocketbooks as well. So it's been a double whammy for us."

Despite the numbers of people who go from homeless to homeowners, Mjartan knows the realities of running a shelter.

"We have to turn people away all of the time," she said. "We have been full for the last year. That is one of the hardest things about my job. Having to turn mothers and fathers away with their little ones in tow. That is heartbreaking. We have an 80-bed shelter, and it is not uncommon for us to have 83 or 84 people living there. Children doubled up in twin beds. It's better than being homeless. But at some point, we just can't take more people and we have to turn them away."

After graduation from University of Arkansas at Little Rock, Mjartan received a prestigious scholarship for post-graduate study in Ireland. "In my masters program, I studied policy, delved into housing issues and realized that while I knew what I wanted to do (improve my community, help people, use my talents for the greater good), I did not yet know how I would get there," she said.

Back in Little Rock, she got a job with Ken Hubbell and Associates helping communities and organizations think strategically about where they were going and what their impact could be. She was invited by Beth Coulson, an Our House board member, to come on the board. Mjartan quickly became involved in several avenues of Our House, which is located on a four-acre campus right on Roosevelt Road near I-30. Within about six months, during which a director was hired and fired, Mjartan was offered the executive director position.

"Although I loved my job as a consultant and had no intention of leaving, I saw a need and decided to take that leap of faith – both personally and professionally. It had not been in my career plan to run a program for the homeless! It was a sacrifice financially, but it was the right decision," she said. "Three years later, I look back and know that was one of the best decisions I have ever made." ❧

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TEETH IS OUR JOB.**

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