

## **History of Family Promise of Greater Savannah**

Early in the 1996, a group of concerned Savannah ministers conducted a homeless needs assessment, which revealed a dire situation in need of prompt attention. The ministers quickly sought guidance to find out how they and their congregations could work to alleviate homelessness in Savannah by turning to the National Interfaith Hospitality Network (IHN) in New Jersey. In September, a team from the National IHN came to Savannah to talk with them about how their innovative program was successfully helping to alleviate homelessness among families with children, and to offer assistance from the national level. Consequently, in October, the same group of ministers gathered together 40 interested community members to hear the National IHN's founder, Karen Olsen, share IHN's origin story and explain how the program could begin to be implemented in Savannah. Olsen's presentation proved so informative and inspirational that the group enthusiastically agreed to meet again the very next month to discuss how to get started.

During the November 1996 meeting, facilitator and then-pastor of Cokesbury United Methodist Church, Dan Pegram, quickly sought strong leadership from within the group. Members of St. Thomas Episcopal church, Irma Steel, Eunice Bell and Deacon Patty Mingledorf, stepped forward to spearhead the next community meeting, which would involve brainstorming and beginning to organize a local IHN affiliate. Community meetings continued, after which participants returned to their individual churches to spread the good word about how, in an extremely cost-effective manner, their own congregations could mobilize to provide meals, support and private family lodging for homeless families with children.

By the August 1997 community meeting, several churches had already agreed to become host churches, St. Thomas Episcopal being the first to come on board. Next came the Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Ascension, followed by St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran, First Presbyterian and White Bluff Presbyterian, along with other churches who regularly sent representatives to lend their support. A founding board of

directors was established, which included Jim Harte, Rev. Don Hanberry, Eunice Bell, Elizabeth Gross, Sid Denhem, Ann Jackson, Irma Steel, Griffin Thomas and Reverend Wyne Hutchings.

At the organization's first official meeting, in September 1997, BOD terms of office were set and the following vital committees were created: Host Church Recruiting, Day Center, Transportation, Fundraising, Personnel, Equipment Procurement and Financing. By October, the organization had applied to the state for approval of its name — Interfaith Hospitality Network of Coastal Georgia — and to be incorporated. It was decided that May 1998, would be a reasonable target date for opening.

November was a busy month for the newly formed IHN. Cokesbury United Methodist Church became the sixth host church, and the Recruiting Committee hosted a luncheon for several other churches with the hope of gaining their help as well. Two crucial steps to aid IHN in reaching its goal of moving families from homelessness to independence and self-reliance were also discussed: 1) a potential house for use as a Day Center and 2) coordinating with other local, social service agencies, such as Savannah's Homeless Authority.

In collaboration with the Homeless Authority, it was decided in January 1998 that all persons served by IHN would need to meet the authority's definition of homelessness in order to be eligible for a variety of support programs. Nonprofit paperwork for IRS 501C3 was also begun.

The first host church coordinators' meeting was held in March 1998 at St. Michael's Church. It was decided that monthly meetings would be held at each individual host church to brainstorm about specific hosting challenges. During the meeting, both St. Michael's and All Angels committed to becoming host churches, and it was announced that IHN had become a certified member of the Chatham-Savannah Authority for the Homeless.

May 1998 was an especially joyous month for IHN of Coastal Georgia. Two new churches joined the seven churches who had already committed to being hosts — Asbury Memorial UMC and St. Philip AME. A potential location for the Day Center was also discussed.

In September 1998, IHN of Coastal Georgia appointed its first director, Steve Thorton. At long last, the affiliate was ready to begin the actual process of moving a family from homelessness to independence and self-reliance. St. Thomas was excited to have the honor of being the first Host Church to graciously welcome a homeless family as their guests in October 1998.

IHN of Coastal Georgia announced in January 2005 that its Day Center would be relocated once more, to a facility located at 24 E. 41<sup>st</sup> Street in Savannah. But it seemed their frequent relocations would soon be a thing of the past. In August of that same year, United Thank Offering of the Episcopal Church awarded IHN of Coastal Georgia initial seed money to help with the purchase of land for a permanent Day Center.

In October 2005, IHN kicked off a capital campaign to help fund the building of a day center, and the organization purchased a lot in November of that year. In March 2007, the official groundbreaking for the new day center was held, and in November 2007, a ribbon cutting was held at the completed building.

In October 2015, due to the growth and expansion of the services offered, IHN changed its name to Family Promise of Greater Savannah. This also aligned the organization better with the national Family Promise organizations across the country.

Katrina Bostick was appointed executive director of Family Promise in 2015, and the organization continued to grow under her leadership. They experienced a nearly perfect success rate with helping families out of poverty while increasing participation, community support and funding on every level. Family Promise thrived for five solid

years and the leadership team's accomplishments did not go unnoticed by the Family Promise national office.

In 2020, Family Promise's three coastal Georgia affiliates — Bryan County, Savannah and Effingham County — announced the significant structural changes that would take place as a result of merging the three affiliates into what would be known as Family Promise of the Coastal Empire. The boards of directors of Family Promise of Savannah, Bryan County and Effingham County agreed that the merger would enable all three to better serve homeless and at-risk families throughout the region, with hopes to expand the region into Liberty County. Katrina Bostick, longtime director of Family Promise of Greater Savannah was appointed to be the executive director of the new, larger affiliate. The board for Family Promise of the Coastal Empire included members from the previous three boards – in Savannah, Bryan and Effingham counties – who volunteered to stay on through the merger and help ensure a smooth transition. Members included Bob Scanlon, retired employee of the City of Savannah; Larry Jackson, CFO of Savannah Chatham County Public School System; Jason Crosby, Strategic Healthcare Partners' VP of Strategic Planning & Population Health; Moses Toole, Pastor of Centerpoint Community Church; Dr. Jackie Brown Pinkney, Homeless Liaison for Effingham County School District; Diana Mydell, HR Director of Comcast; Wendy Sims, Executive Director of Bryan County Family Connection; David London, Retired Army and ROTC Instructor at Groves High School; Sara Fullerton, Senior Church Administrator of The Chapel Effingham; Jeanne Wallace, minister of music at Richmond Hill United Methodist Church; and Kelvin Bryant, Chatham County District Attorney Investigator. In addition, three new staffers joined the Family Promise team: Lindsay Schilder, MSW; Jeronia Clark, BSW; and Heather Hodges, B.S., who serve as Family Support Specialists.

The change was designed to empower Family Promise with a larger and stronger network of resources, supporters and partners. It was also decided that each county would maintain its own day center and network of churches to supply shelter, food, donations and various other forms of support. Each county continues to maintain its

own day center and staff to care for and assist all program participants whenever needed as they advance through the programs.

### **Family Promise of Bryan County History**

In the fall of 2013, concerned community members of Bryan County assembled to discuss the possibility of establishing an affiliate of the national nonprofit organization Interfaith Hospitality Network, known as Family Promise. From this small gathering sprang the grass-roots effort that was necessary to develop an organization capable of providing homeless children and their families the support needed to get them back on their feet again.

In 2015, then-public relations chairwoman for Family Promise of Bryan County, Candice Stewart-Fife, launched the “Building Lives” fundraising campaign designed to make the affiliate a firm reality by early 2016. The organization had recently finalized a building to serve as the day center and had 11 host churches and three support churches, and were seeking two more host churches. The campaign asked individuals, families, and companies to become founding donors to help homeless and low-income families achieve sustainable independence. There were many sponsorship levels, including becoming a member of the “Club 297,” or donating whatever anyone could afford, to allow Family Promise to open its doors in Bryan County sooner rather than later.

Throughout the years, Family Promise of Bryan County had engaged with the local community through various initiatives and fundraising events, such as the award-winning Shooting with the Stars Clay Shoot, which was voted Best Fundraiser of Bryan County, as well as the Prescription to End Homelessness and the annual Red Hot Chili Pepper 5K Race, which began in 2013.

Before making the decision in 2019 to go ahead with the merger of its three affiliates — Bryan County, Savannah and Effingham County – the three boards discussed the potential benefits for months. They arrived at the conclusion they could better serve

homeless and at-risk families throughout the region by joining forces and even making future plans to continue the expansion, eventually moving into Liberty County.

### **Family Promise of Effingham County History**

Plans to establish Family Promise of Effingham County were launched on April 23, 2013, when a compassionate group of people – with a strong desire to use their skills, knowledge and resources – met to try and help end homelessness in their community. The purpose of that first meeting was to establish a core group committee, elect a group leader and create the four essential committees necessary to get the organization up and running as quickly as possible.

A tremendous amount was accomplished during that first meeting. Most importantly, the hard-working, dedicated volunteers of Family Promise of Effingham County knew they were on their way to bringing genuine help to the homeless people in their community who so desperately needed it.

On March 10, 2014, Claas Ehlers came from the National Family Promise Affiliate in New Jersey to host the meeting and provide training for the ECFP's board of directors orientation meeting. Members of that first board included: President-Brian Dickey, Vice President-David Harris, Secretary Julie Hales, Treasurer Elizabeth Ralph and Dr. Franklin Goldwire, Julie Hlaes, David Harris, Herb Jones, Elizabeth Ralph, Father David Rose, Mark Smith, Rev. Melissa Traver and Jean Vaught. It's important to note that two years later, in 2016, National Family Promise Founder and President, Karen Olson, would retire and Claas Ehlers would become the Director of Affiliate Services and the organization's second leader.

On March 19, 2014, Family Promise of Effingham County formed an interview team to find the organization's first executive director. Interviews began April 10 and on May 7, amidst tremendous enthusiasm, the board announced the appointment of Ashley Moore as the executive director of Family Promise of Effingham County. Along with a Bachelor

of Science in psychology and Masters in marriage and family therapy, Moore also brought a wealth of work experience and boundless energy to the job.

In 2015, a mere three years after its organization, Family Promise of Effingham County was making great strides in helping local homeless families regain independence. A mother and her young family, who had been in the program since December of 2015, found full time employment after the new year and, by May 2016, had secured permanent housing.

In May 2017, a diligent search committee found another set of incredibly capable hands — those of Leah Kessler – to lead Family Promise of Effingham County into its next important phase. On Dec. 19, 2017, Kessler made an exciting announcement: “Here’s a picture of our soon to be Family Promise House!” The house, provided by and located on the property of Centerpoint Community Church, officially became Family Promise’s new home on April 1, 2018.

The year 2020 brought the biggest change yet. Family Promise’s three area affiliates – in Savannah, Bryan and Effingham counties – underwent some significant structural changes to merge and form the new Family Promise of the Coastal Empire, led by executive director Katrina Bostick.

The board for Family Promise of the Coastal Empire is comprised of members from the previous three boards – in Savannah, Bryan and Effingham counties – who volunteered to stay on through the merger and help ensure a smooth transition.

This change has empowered Family Promise with a larger and stronger network of resources, supporters and partners. Each county still maintains its own day center and network of churches that supply shelter, food, donations, and various other forms of support. Each day center also maintains a staff, which strives to care for and assist all program participants whenever needed as they advance through the programs.