

Marywood

Stepping Stones Program helps homeless mothers and their children find hope through lessons on parenting, education and job training

Story by Kristin Elmore / Photos provided by Marywood

If walls could talk at Marywood, they undoubtedly would have inspiring tales to tell -- stories of kindness, generosity, benevolence, growth, education, and opportunity abound at this multi-purpose organization. Though Marywood provides four programs, each designed to assist pregnant or parenting women, ages 12 to 21, one program in particular provides transitional housing and education for single, homeless mothers.

Program Supervisor for Marywood's Stepping Stones Program, Jennifer Redish, LMSW, recently sat down with me to discuss the goals, challenges, and details of this valuable program.



Marywood started 82 years ago as a Catholic "baby home" for abandoned and unwanted children. Named "The Home of the Holy Infancy" until 1977, Marywood

continues their mission of helping young mothers and their children by providing resources for pregnant and parenting teenagers, foster care homes, shelter, education, job and life-skills training, as well as adoption services.

In 1999, the Stepping Stones program was created for homeless young women ages 17-21, and their children, with the ultimate goal of helping these young women become independent, self-sustaining parents and individuals. While living in the Stepping Stones program, the young women are required to attend parenting classes to learn about their child's development and become the best parents they can be. They are also obligated to attend school to earn a GED or high school diploma. If a young woman has already obtained her diploma or GED, she is expected to maintain gainful employment or be involved in job training.

To help the young women find a suitable job, Stepping Stones helps individuals ascertain job interests, skills, and values. Through the Stepping Stones program, the young women are also provided onsite therapy including individual, family, and play therapy. These young mothers also receive assistance in applying for Medicaid and child support payments.

Fruitful endeavors do not come without challenges. As with other service providers, Stepping Stones faces difficulty in obtaining adequate health and dental care for the homeless mothers and their children. Considering the center's ultimate responsibility for their residents, a lack of adequate medical care is worrisome.

And the challenges continue. Considering the critical goal of helping the women establish and maintain viability, the program must allow for personal independence. At the same time, scheduling is not easy. Balancing work, school, and childcare schedules can be daunting when trying to manage a group of young, determined women. But Marywood works to address these challenges by providing multiple resources. When childcare services cannot be obtained through Child Inc., Austin Families steps forward to offer assistance through donated childcare vouchers.

Recently accredited by the National Council on Accreditation for Children and Family Services, Marywood is a 24-hour staffed facility. Mothers live with their children in a dorm-like atmosphere, which includes suites with adjoining bathrooms, as well as common living and dining areas.

Marywood also partners with the University of Texas at Austin to offer an on-site charter school where these young women are educated in math, science, vocabulary, and computer skills, tailored to individual needs. On weekends, residents are encouraged to participate in group activities such as crafts, recreation, and other hobbies.

Whether pregnant or already parenting, beneficiaries of the Stepping Stones program come from all parts of Texas. The program receives referrals from crisis pregnancy centers, hospitals, shelters, and word of mouth.

Marywood also partners with many other agencies and organizations to further help the young women in their Stepping Stones program. Good Will Industries offers employment for the young women through their Youth Employment Partnership. We Angels, a part of Lisa's Hope Chest, provides a 10-week onsite survival skills training program for women. Other collaborations include Lifeworks, Child Inc., UT School of Social Work and School of Nursing interns, Austin Families, and the Food Pantry.

Currently, Marywood is in need of cash and service donations, as well as volunteers for tutoring, recreational planning and implementation. For information, please call Marywood at 512-472-9251. To refer a client for Stepping Stones' services, please contact the Intake Office at Marywood. To make a donation, please contact Marywood's Development Office.