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Give me shelter

Hollister resident Cindy Parr, the new manager of the homeless shelter, sat in the kitchen with two of her daughters Cindy Lopez, left, and Brianna Lopez.



Posted: Friday, November 9, 2007 12:00 am

Melissa Flores | **0 comments**

New manager is no stranger to misfortune

Cindy Parr has shoulder-length blond hair and deep blue eyes. When she talks, her voice has the raspiness of someone who smokes, but who has also done harder drugs in the past. She is not shy when talking about her past and she is optimistic about her future. Parr struggled with drug addiction, including addiction to methamphetamines, for 20 years. She's been sober for two years.

Her sobriety started just before Christmas in 2005. The mother of five, she had just finished serving time in the local jail for a drug-related offense, when she returned home to her kids. Her children were all feeling sorry for themselves because they had few Christmas gifts so Parr decided to take them to volunteer at the Homeless Shelter.

"I wanted to instill in them that the homeless have nothing," Parr said. "There is no better person to give back to. All they need to know is there is someone out there who cares."

Parr's oldest daughter is 18 and has a baby. Her 16-year-old son lives out of state with his father. Her younger son who is now 14, went reluctantly along with his younger sisters, Cindy Lopez, now 10, and Brianna Lopez, now 13 to volunteer.

"He is such a hard little guy," Parr said. "He throws a wall up to protect himself."

But while at the shelter, she saw her son watching Leigh Dietz, then-executive director of the shelter, filling out intake paperwork with one of the men.

"I saw a change in [my son]," Parr said. "I saw God working in him and the rest of the night, he couldn't keep their cups of coffee full enough or serve the food fast enough."

Parr continued to volunteer at the shelter with a church group from Hillside Christian Fellowship, but within a month she was hired on as a staff member.

The shelter has been open for two seasons now and the Homeless Task Force and shelter staff have a goal of expanding services year-round and adding transitional living spaces in addition to emergency shelter housing. But this year the shelter staff does not have enough money yet to operate for the full season. The shelter opens the weekend after Thanksgiving and remains open through March. A federal emergency grant did not come through for both the Homeless Shelter and Emmaus House – both nonprofits are scrambling to find other sources of money for their operating budget.

The Shelter needs about \$75-80,000 a year to remain open for the winter months and they are short \$20,000. If the money is not raised, the shelter staff will close it down a month earlier than past years.

As site manager this year, Parr's duties mostly focus on day-to-day operations and ramping up donations of everything from toiletries to paper products to be used throughout the season.

Earlier this week, Nov. 6, Parr fielded calls from shelter supporters while her daughters, Brianna and the youngest one, who is nicknamed little Cindy, watched the Disney Channel. Her daughters have striking eyes, though they are more hazel than their mother's blue eyes. They both have long hair, Brianna with dark locks and little Cindy with honey-colored hair. The girls laugh and smile easily.

Her children know about her struggle with drugs and she attends weekly meetings at Celebrate Recovery, a faith-based recovery program at Hillside Christian Fellowship.

"We take for granted the roof over our head and our food," Parr said. "For 80 or 90 percent of people at the shelter, life has dumped them a lousy hand."

Parr can relate. Though she didn't realize it most of her life, she recently started to understand that her drug use was a way to cover up shame and pain from childhood abuse, she said.

"For 20 years I didn't choose such a good life," Parr said. "It's just by God that I didn't end up on the streets."

The same space is used as the migrant camp and the Homeless Shelter, so the shelter staff has to move many supplies into storage from spring to fall. The staff had planned to move into the shelter Nov. 16 in preparation of opening a week later, but Nov. 5 Parr got a call that the staff had to move everything out of the storage unit a week early.

"We are going to clean tonight and move stuff in on Thursday," she said. "We had trucks lined up for the 16th so now we need to call around and ask, 'Hey, you got a truck?'"

When the shelter is open, staff members enforce a zero-tolerance policy for drugs and alcohol.

"We do a very basic intake form," Parr said. "We have behavioral services, vet services, medical and dental."

Last year, Parr and Dietz, who has moved out of the area, put together job listings from signs they saw at grocery stores or in the classifieds.

"We called it paper picking," she said.

Many of the people who stay at the shelter take advantage of the services, Parr said, and most of the time there are no incidences.

On rare occasions, Parr and the staff have had to call law enforcement in to deal with someone. She recalled one time she had to call the sheriff's department to take one man away when he was drunk. He apologized a few months later.

"I got so angry at the person for taking it there," she said.

Mostly, the shelter, which serves men and women over age 18, is a safe place.

Parr still brings her kids up to volunteer.

"We get there around 4 p.m. and it's hard getting everything ready before 7 p.m.," Brianna said. "We set up all the tables and do a lot of hard work. We serve the people and help serve the food."

The shelter is helped along by other volunteers and members of the Homeless Task Force.

"We have such a compassionate board," Parr said. "It is one goal we are trying to meet."

Parr attends Task Force meetings, and a recent meeting discussed ways to raise money. A few days later Parr said she is confident the community will come through.

As the end of November approaches, Parr is focused on what the shelter needs for opening day. But she still makes sure she has time for her children and time to attend her Celebrate Recovery meetings each week.

She talked about a song she heard at a church service that hit home for her.

"It was about how [the singer] had all kinds of regrets, but she wouldn't take back her yesterdays because she had to go through that to get where she is today," Parr said. "Today I'm a happy girl."

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- Driver gets 2-year prison sentence for DUI death
- Five suspects arrested after assault at Caputo Court party
- Hollister history buffs compile photos, stories for new book
- Boxer surprised signs show him endorsing mayoral candidate

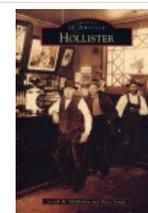
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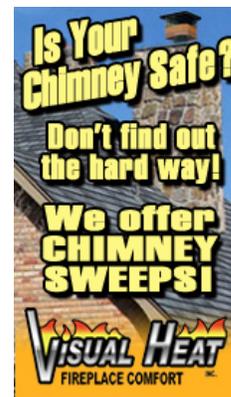
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