

The Bethlehem House provides hope for Omaha women

By Kayla Eggenberg

A new pregnancy can be one of the most joyful moments in a woman's life. However, without the correct resources or support system, the responsibility of raising a child can be overwhelming.

Founded in 2005, the Bethlehem House celebrates its 11th year of operation in 2016. During those 11 years, this unique maternity home has offered a safe haven for pregnant women going through difficult times in their lives.

Gina Tomes, family life director at the Bethlehem House, says she's passionate about improving the lives of Omaha women who find themselves pregnant and homeless.

"We have been providing women who find themselves pregnant and homeless a home and we surround them with unconditional love," Tomes says, "and what I consider the community's most amazing resources."

Each woman who walks through the door receives a personalized life plan to prepare her for motherhood and teach her how to be a healthy parent. These plans include health care needs, mental health needs, addiction support and recovery, financial resources, housing, transportation and even the opportunity to complete her GED.

"There's no one woman alike," Tomes says. "We have 11 women living here at all times, we're always full, and we create what we call a family life plan for each mommy who comes through our doors that is not like any other."

The dynamic of the house requires each woman participates in a structured and healthy lifestyle. The women are encouraged to be involved in the family environment that includes attending necessary classes and counseling throughout their entire stay at the Bethlehem House.

"We are providing a direct impact in each woman," Tomes says. "As far as the need in the Omaha community, if there's a chance to break the cycle of chronic homelessness, we're breaking it—but they have to want it. You have to be productive and up and running to be here, this is not a typical shelter."

The Bethlehem House connects with nearly 30 different community partners, each providing a valuable service to the women who live there. "We're a great place for a woman who is out of recovery or who needs a safe and sober environment, a family dynamic," Tomes says.

"A lot of our women come to us with a very distorted image of what a family looks like, so we try to give her what it is like to actually be accountable and to be a family member."



Metro Area Continuum of Care for the Homeless

T'eyrr, who has been a resident at the Bethlehem House for about two months, says she is grateful for the opportunity to be surrounded by this supportive group of women and to learn responsibility before she has her baby.

"When I found out I was pregnant I was like, 'OK, it's time for me to learn how to do stuff on my own.' My parents were upset with me, but they didn't kick me out," T'eyrr says. "I just really wanted to be an adult and grow up. There's so much stuff that I don't know how to do and now there's someone else who is going to be depending on me and this program just helps you a lot as far as parenting and living on your own."

Although she has only been at the house for a couple of months, T'eyrr says she already knows that deciding to move in was a smart decision.

"Just knowing that you have a support system and knowing that if I have any questions about anything I can go to pretty much anyone here," T'eyrr says. "There's someone available for me at all times."



T'eyrr just got accepted to the University of Nebraska Medical Center's early admissions program. She says she is proud of her academic achievements despite adversity and looks forward to beginning medical school in the fall.

"[The Bethlehem House] is just a really great program, and you don't have to get kicked out of the house in order to come here, they just help you with resources and they're there for you," T'eyrr says. "If you don't have that support system at home then you can find it here."

Above all, the Bethlehem House is an organization devoted to the women of Omaha. Those who work

closely with the organization are passionate about creating a healthy and happy environment for pregnant women who would otherwise feel isolated throughout their pregnancies.

"When women come into this environment it is so peaceful, it is so safe, and it is so loving and it is just so surrounded by such amazing, strong, courageous women and men – they feel hopeful," Tomes says. "They're seeing other women doing it and they are hopeful."