

Serving extra helpings of hope

City shelter brightens the holiday for women and children in need

Editor's note: The names of some mothers and children were changed to protect their identities.

By Rita Savard
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LOWELL — The scene on TV takes them back. Back to when they were wide-eyed and little. Back to practicing high-kicks in their living rooms, just like the Rockettes.

Giant balloons soaring above crowded Manhattan streets. Swarms of marching bands. Santa Claus waving from his Christmas float.

The Macy's Parade is a Thanksgiving tradition, like the smell of roasted turkey wafting through the kitchen.

Please see **HOPE/6**



Brandy Nicole Wright, 24, of San Antonio, holds her 5-month-old son, Eric Anthony Burnett, as she receives her Thanksgiving meal at the House of Hope women's shelter yesterday afternoon.

SUN / AMANDA-BETH POTTER

Fresh meals, fresh starts

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Now the pull of nostalgia triggers something else — where they are, where they're going.

It's Thanksgiving. And the women in this living room were thrown together by circumstance.

The TV they watch is not their own. Their beds are borrowed. The turkey they will eat is cooking in someone else's kitchen.

A sign on the wall reads House of Hope. For the women who live at the shelter, it means possibility. A fresh start.

Their stories are the kind you don't hear about enough, says Deb Chausse, executive director. Chausse is also much like a second mother-figure to the 18 families residing under one roof.

The poorest of the poor. Women who were abused and in bad relationships. Women who made mistakes and are fighting to survive.



Julie D'Arcangelo of Lowell and her daughters, Alissa, 9, left, and Tiffani, 14, drop off holiday desserts.

"These are not bad women," Chausse says. "They are women with dreams, just trying to reach out and grab them like the rest of us."

The kitchen tables are set with plastic and paper. Around the corner, a playroom is lined with toys and rows of books. The *Velveteen Rabbit* is Chausse's favorite, a story about a toy rabbit hoping to become real. Over time, love makes it happen.

For "Jane," hope is in the face of a 7-month old named "Lilly."

Three months ago, Jane arrived on Chausse's doorstep. Like hundreds before her, she traveled light. A few bags of clothes and a small, squirming bundle.

"I was scared and I was embarrassed," says Jane. "I felt like a failure."

She runs a hand through a stream of dark hair falling to her shoulders. One year ago, she never would have dreamed

she'd be living at a shelter.

The 28-year-old has a college degree. She lived in a large, three-bedroom house in the suburbs, fell in love with a "nice guy," got pregnant.

"I was happy," she says. Then her boyfriend started disappearing. Sometimes for a night, sometimes for days. Jane found out he was using heroin.

"Throughout my pregnancy, he was off and on — stay clean for a little bit, but then go back to using again," she says. "I kind of put up with it because I hoped he would get better."

Lilly was born in April. Jane's boyfriend was in the delivery room. She thought the birth of their daughter would change him.

On Father's Day, her boyfriend left for two days. When he came back, he was high. Jane looked at Lilly.

"I sat there and thought, she's only 2 months old now, but what's going to happen when she's 3, 4 or 5, and asks where's Daddy?" Jane says. "I got what I could carry, I got in a cab and left."

She scoops up her little girl, who just started crawling. Lilly loves music, heard Bob Dylan live in concert when she was still in Jane's belly.

"The way I see it, I'm going to get my own place, continue to work and put this behind me."

"Lucy" is a convicted felon. A false rap she says that she took for her boyfriend. He was selling drugs and



Aden Antonio, 3, of Amesbury, shares a cookie during Thanksgiving dinner at the House of Hope in Lowell as shelter employee Margo Maloney looks on. SUN PHOTOS / AMANDA-BETH POTTER

got caught by the police. He would have faced 10 years in prison if Lucy didn't tell a judge they were hers, she says.

"It's difficult when you give up everything for one person," says the 37-year-old. "But I loved him."

Later, the couple had a baby girl, J'Anna. Lucy thought things would get better. But the drug use continued. So did the fighting.

She was forced out of the house.

A hair stylist, Lucy worked at salons on Boston's stylish Newbury Street, in upscale Andover and Winchester. Now she works at a book-binding company. Packing. Sealing. Stacking.

She looks around at her roommates. Women who've all

gone down different tracks. Now they're riding the same train.

"I have nothing except a little girl," she says. "I guess I have everything."

The shelter is just a "stump in the road."

"Next year, I know I'll be making Thanksgiving dinner in my own kitchen," she says.

Outside Lucy's room, framed portraits of women with their kids wallpaper the hallway. Soon they will spread from ceiling to floor. Images to remind women in the house that they're not alone.

"Being here is not a personal indictment," Chausse says. "It's really a systemic issue. These beautiful faces tell that story."

Today, she says, there are more homeless families in Mass-

achusetts than ever before.

"Far too many children who will not be enjoying the simple bounty of Thanksgiving," she says.

In the living room, kids laugh and play. Like their mothers did before them, they watch an 81-year-old parade roll by on the TV.

The doorbell rings. Strangers donate food. House manager Marion Maloney — also a second mother to the residents — bastes a 20-pound bird, prepares a feast.

The women in the house know they are loved, Chausse says. She believes it will empower them to be what they want to become.

"Nothing could be more real," she says.

**House of Hope's Response
To Lowell Sun November 23rd article:**

House of Hope grateful for region's assistance

The Lowell Sun

Article Last Updated: 11/28/2007 11:31:30 AM EST

Thank you, Rita Savard, for taking the time on Thanksgiving morning to listen to our mothers' stories and for making the recent House of Hope article more than a feel-good fluff piece. All 18 families at House of Hope have compelling experiences and circumstances contributing to their homelessness and it is in the public interest to tell these stories. Thanks also to Amanda Potter who worked hard to snap the right photos that visually depict the story of our moms and their kids and our ongoing dependence on the public to be the most welcoming, loving and caring community of hope that we can be. For the 23rd consecutive year, House of Hope's efforts resulted in a bountiful Thanksgiving for dozens of homeless or recently homeless families. Our determined and loving staff could not have achieved this outcome without the generous support of many compassionate families and friends such as the D'Arcangelos pictured in the story.

Thanks again to everyone who helps us to achieve our mission every day of every year.

DEB CHAUSSE, executive director
House of Hope, Lowell