

Offering Hope ~ Providing Opportunity ~ Confirming Dignity ~ Ensuring Safety ~ Establishing Community
Demonstrating Hospitality

10th Annual Gala—2008

The **Tenth Annual Gala** was held on February 9th at the Cahaba Grand. As always, this event is our largest fund raiser and we are proud to announce that the Gala raised the most amount of money yet! Over 400 people attended what has become a truly fun evening. It celebrates and honors First Light's mission and those who have assisted in carrying it out. The *Volunteer of the Year* award was given to Joy O'Neal, who has been involved with the agency for several years. She volunteers to do anything needed to enhance the service we give to our guests. Joy is a board member, a leader on the Gala committee who helps coordinate the displaying of art for the Live and Silent auctions... she is always there when we have a need.

Our *Gala Honoree* for the year was Ken Jackson, who has volunteered his time for many years to be the auctioneer for the Live auction and has brought our mission to the attention of many friends and associates. His input has served to lift the Gala to a higher level – making it the most significant fund raising effort we conduct each year. Thank you, Joy and Ken, for giving your very best to First Light year after year.



Gala Honoree—Ken Jackson



Volunteer of the Year—Joy O'Neal

Special Thanks to:

Blair Sandford, Gala Coordinator

Ken Jackson, Honoree and Live Auctioneer

Joy O'Neal, Volunteer of the Year

Greg Bass and **Courtney Haden**, Emcees

Scott Gordon, Graphic Artist

Robin Wilson, Photographer

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Food for Thought

"You can't understand homelessness unless you compare an individual's life to a house of cards," says Pete Walentisch, who oversees the Department of Human Services for the City of Williamsburg, Virginia area.

Walentisch asks us to imagine each aspect of your life as one card. A card may be school, your family relationships, your friends etc. The closer a card to the foundation of your house of cards, the more important it is, because other cards rely on that card for support.

"When each of us confronts a problem, if the card is on top, chances are, the rest of what you dealt [underneath] for security is okay. It keeps the house standing," he said, describing how a single crisis can result in homelessness. "If a card impacts tons of other cards, the whole house of cards starts to tumble."

We see this every day at First Light. Women present themselves as homeless and as the story unfolds it is hardly ever just one thing that made them homeless. Yes, for some there may have been a major crisis that left them with nothing. But more likely, it is a series of problems, health related issues, substance abuse, mental illness...usually a "percolating" of disabling difficulties that takes one down the path of homelessness, which, for some, can become a chronic state.

"You can't stereotype," Walentisch said. "There are as many reasons [for homelessness] as there are homeless people. There's extenuating circumstances in each individual and family that has brought them to homelessness." Walentisch groups homeless individuals into three major categories: local residents who are facing life crises, transients who have nowhere to go, and discharges from local jails, mental institutions or other facilities who do not have the resources to find permanent residences.

What we attempt to do here at First Light is to look at the overall picture...all those "cards" to see where a guest can begin to rebuild her "house." If you have unpaid utility bills or past fines, then getting those paid off by securing employment may have to happen before you can even think about securing an apartment. If you are struggling with addictions or undiagnosed and untreated mental health conditions, it is fairly reasonable to say it will be tough trying to get and keep a job.

Simply getting a diagnosis (does this seem like a luxury to you and me?) can be a crucial first step toward healing and life change. This is why we have the JBS Clinic here on our premises—to provide easy access for our guests to see a psychiatrist, get a diagnosis and begin to receive medications to treat the illness.

We ask donors and funders to help us with transportation and medication assistance because our guests so desperately need the "luxury" of being able to go to doctor's appointments and to receive the medications they need. We all know, in our hearts, how precariously the cards sit, at times, in our own lives...it could be any of us showing up at those glass double doors at the corner of Fourth Avenue North and 23rd Street.

*The house of cards (from an article in the Flat Hat News by Sam Sutton)

By Deb Everson
Assistant Director



Sarah Brooks

Staff Social Worker, Sarah Brooks, has reached two new milestones in her life. First, she tested and passed to become a Licensed Social Worker. This is an important step in her professional development. Sarah came to First Light after graduating from the University of Montevallo. She quickly embraced her role on staff here and she is an effective and compassionate supportive care provider to our guests. We are grateful that she is part of our team.

Secondly, Sarah exchanged wedding vows with her fiancé, Ben Greer, on Saturday, March 15th, at the Aldridge Botanical Gardens. FL staff members attended the lovely outdoor ceremony and reception. They honeymooned in Jamaica. Ben teaches Finance at Trussville High School.

Congratulations to Sarah and Ben Greer –we wish you many happy years!!

Permanent Supportive Housing Update

Many of you know that we launched two new programs in the Summer of 2007. They both provide permanent supportive housing to women who have been guests in First Light's Emergency Shelter. Here is where we stand as of April 2008:

BESSEMER/HUD project (for chronically homeless women) There are currently seven women who qualified and have been moved into an apartment community outside downtown Bessemer. The eighth and final participant in this specific project will be housed in April or May. These are the apartments for which we asked friends of FL to "adopt" kitchens, bedrooms, etc. by assisting us in stocking the units with new or "gently used" furnishings and supplies. The ladies are doing well. The Permanent Housing Social Worker, Francis Crowder, sees the women every week. The intensive case management is designed to match the needs, goals and capabilities of each individual in the program. All of the women have income through employment, except one who has disability income.

The truly wonderful and significant development with this project was that we ended up finding **one** apartment community where **all** the ladies could live.

There is a great working relationship between the apartment management and the FL social worker and administration. In fact, they call us when another apartment becomes available. If we have a woman prepared to make the move we can sign a lease and get things rolling. **Shelter+Care** (for homeless women with disabling conditions which have kept them homeless). This is a collaboration between First Light and Pathways. Women from both agencies may be referred for Shelter+Care. First Light's Director of Social Services oversees the project once a woman has entered the program from either agency. The project was set up to provide permanent supportive housing to at least 25 women who were guests in either the FL Emergency Shelter or the Pathways Transitional housing program. Another 25 women will be housed in Year 2 of this project. The women receive vouchers from the Jefferson County Housing Authority to pay their rent. Included in the grant budget was the hiring of a Permanent Supportive Housing Social Worker per each group of 25 women.

To date we have 19 women either housed or approved to receive vouchers and seeking to secure their apartments. The remaining six participants will be housed before Year One cycle is complete.

The significance of these two programs cannot be stressed enough. Formerly, after a guest left us we could not provide continuing supportive care as they sought to re-establish their lives. Chronic homelessness, disabling conditions: these are the major stumbling blocks to successfully accomplishing the goal of living independently.

Nationwide the awareness has come that the KEY to helping the homeless keep their housing is that supportive care component. And this is what First Light does so well. Sherry Webb has done a tremendous job of assembling and training a team of dedicated and compassionate social workers who do their best every day for our guests. It is thanks to their professionalism and commitment that we have been able to launch these programs and enjoy such a fine reputation among the community.

...the KEY to helping the homeless keep their housing is that supportive care component.





Winter season fundraisers

— Best ever results!!

The annual **Holiday Lights** fundraiser is one that touches a lot of hearts. Participants in this project make a contribution to FL and in return, the agency sends holiday greeting cards either in honor of, or in memory of whom-ever the donors indicate. The agency, in turn, decorates the exterior of the building with strings of holiday lights—to light up the night with cheer and hope for those we serve.

What makes this so special is that we *hand address* the cards and the envelopes to give this a really personal touch. The recipient receives a card which advises them that a generous donation has been made to FL in their honor, or, in the case of memorials, in memory of their loved one. What a wonderful way to pay tribute to someone you hold in high esteem! This season's results brought a significant contribution to the agency and we appreciate all who participated in this meaningful project.

Abigail Garrett – she did it again!

You may remember our story last year telling about Abigail Garrett and her special idea for giving a contribution to First Light. This goes back in time a bit : when Abbie turned 8 years old she invited friends to come to her party, but asked them to give a donation to First Light instead of giving her a gift. That year she brought “Miss Ruth” over \$200.00 in cash. Last year Abbie became a ten year old and her contribution was \$621.00.

Obviously, generosity runs deep in the Garrett family (thanks Angel and Brian!) because Abbie didn't skip a year this time. This enthusiastic eleven year old kept First Light as her special intention for this year's birthday celebration and brought more than last year--\$650.00 Who says one person cannot make a difference? Children do understand that they play an important role in their communities and

that giving back, serving others, thinking of those less fortunate is right and good. In a speech to Pizitz Middle School's Good Citizenship Assembly last year, Deb Everson used Abbie as an example of how young people can and should accept a moral and civic responsibility to give of themselves to their communities. Whether they choose as their “issue,” the environment, civil rights, or homelessness....children can learn at an early age to look outside themselves to help others and to try to make the world a better place. This one child has inspired so many others by this simple gift she gives...her family, her friends, her school-mates have all learned about First Light. Thank you, Abbie... there is no telling what seeds of generosity have been planted as a result of your unselfish act.



**Last year
Abbie became
a ten year old
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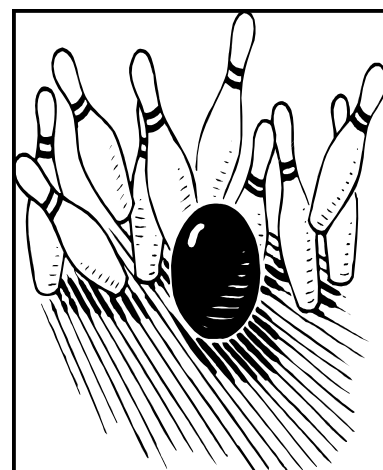


Wii and the 4th Floor guests...

First Light guests on 4th Floor have learned something new: Wii (pronounced “we”) You may have seen ads on television showing folks in living rooms, in nursing homes, in activity centers, playing virtual baseball, tennis, boxing or bowling. Ruth Crosby brought her Wii game to First Light one day—and it never

went back to Ruth's house! The ladies LOVE trying to bowl. The game connects to your television and the various games can be selected ...you can even choose your own little “Weeble” looking character to be “you” with your hair color, glasses, eye color, etc. Screeches were sounding as the ladies tried to get strikes instead of gutter balls.

It was a way to get folks moving and pretending to do the real thing. And guess what! The 4th floor ladies went on a field trip in April to go to a REAL bowling alley! The balls were a little heavier than the Wii remote controls but they had a great time with Ms. Sherry (who needed to use the side bumpers when it was her turn) and plan to go bowling again soon.



Holidays at First Light are so fun!

Our volunteers help turn difficult times for our guests into a time of celebration and fun.

Stacey Norwood, a member of Independent Presbyterian Church and Associate Editor at Hoffman Media, planned a wonderful, fun Easter activity for the women at First Light! On Good Friday, the women got together to eat cookies and ice cream while decorating and stuffing Easter goodie baskets for themselves or the special children in their lives.

Gwen, a fourth floor permanent supportive housing resident, made 2 baskets for kids at her church while Karen, a guest in our emergency shelter, decorated a sweet basket for her 7-year-old daughter. Everyone there had a wonderful time, including Stacey and her co-worker, Melinda, who helped the ladies decorate their baskets.

This is just one example of the fun activities that volunteers can do for the women at First Light- giving them something fun to do, a gift to give a loved one, an outlet for creative expression, a little piece of the life we so often take for granted. If you have a special talent or a creative idea for a group activity, please contact Shannon Horsley, Volunteer Manager, at fleoordinator@yahoo.com or 323-4277. We'd love to hear your ideas!



Festivities of Gala 2008

Leaving a legacy...

More and more people are making a difference in their communities and finding meaningful ways to do so. Charged with being good stewards of First Light and its mission, the Board of Directors has been working to enhance the long term sustainability of the agency. It is now possible to make bequests directly into the Bill and Weesa Matthews Endowment Fund. This is totally separate from the operating fund and is meant to create longevity for the agency and its future. If you would like to include First Light, Inc. in the legacy you leave behind, or would like to make a contribution to our endowment, you can simply send your check to First Light indicating that it is "for the Endowment Fund." If you have any questions please feel free to contact Ruth Crosby, Executive Director.

Will You Help?

YOU can make a difference in the lives of Birmingham's homeless women and children.

YOU can provide shelter from a life on the streets where there is no place to go when it is raining and cold, except for a business building's overhang, under a bridge, the public library or a cardboard house made from boxes rescued from a dumpster.

YOU can make a sanctuary available to women and children 24 hours a day with social and counseling services. Because First Light exists, no woman or child has to sleep on the street, in a car or stay in an unhealthy situation.

YOU can help provide specialized programs geared to chronically mentally ill women, those who cannot complete traditional day programs.

No one plans on being homeless, abused, mentally ill or addicted to drugs and/or alcohol.

No one aspires to be homeless.

I (we) give the following gift, offering a physical example of commitment, care and concern for the homeless women and children in our community.

\$ 10,000 or more	Benefactor
\$ 5,000—\$ 9,999	Patron
\$ 1,000—\$ 4,999	Investor
\$ 500—\$ 999	Sponsor
\$ 250—\$ 499	Sustainer
\$ 100—\$ 249	Advocate
\$ 1—\$ 99	Friend

WISH LIST

Hygiene and Personal Items —
New, unopened packages only

Cold, sinus, allergy and cough medications
Cough drops
Over-the-counter stomach medications
Pain relief medications
Pill Boxes
Feminine hygiene products
Kleenex
Chapstick
Deodorant

Food—New, unopened packages only
Fruit
Cereal
Cereal Bars
Pop-tarts
Instant grits and oatmeal (individual packages)
Powered drink mixes
Paper or Styrofoam bowls and cups
Plastic forks, spoons and knives
Quart and gallon-size Ziploc bags
Snacks for life skills program

Will you help provide shelter and essential services to homeless women and children in a place of hope and love with a sense of home and family?

If you don't, who will?



Name (s): _____

Address: _____

City/State/Zip: _____

Phone: _____ E-mail: _____

This contribution is made: Name: _____

____ In memory of: Address: _____

____ In honor of: City/State/Zip: _____

____ This is an anonymous gift. Your name will not be included in our annual report.

The First Light Ladies SHINE!!

Thanks to the hard work of dedicated volunteers, the guests at First Light recently sang and danced the day away at the first annual First Light Talent Show.

In January, LaKeshia Dunson contacted Shannon Horsley, Volunteer Manager at First Light, with a unique new idea- why not let the women staying at the shelter show off their talents and have a little fun?! Dunson, an employee at the law firm, Starnes and Atchison, regularly helps serve dinner at First Light with other employees from the firm. After hearing several of the ladies sing, she talked with a friend of hers, JaQuita Upshaw, who gave her the idea of putting on a talent show. When Dunson began telling her friends and co-workers what she was planning, people started donating money and services to help her pull it off.

"A burning desire to do something more for the ladies was birthed after spending so much time with them, getting to know them, and ministering to them. They were always an inspiration to me with their singing talents. They would sing to me every time I went to serve them and would always tell me how grateful they were to have me there.

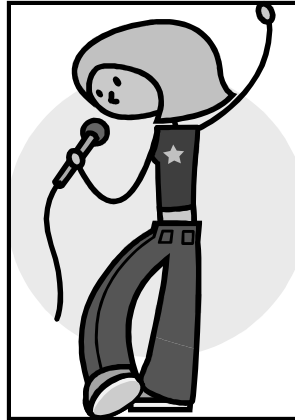
I wanted them to know and believe that they were of great value no matter where they were or what they had been through. Building their confidence and giving them hope was my main focus. I wanted the women to know that they were **'Fearfully and Wonderfully Made,'** which was the theme of the talent show."

Lakeshia didn't just show up the day of the event. She made several trips to First Light to meet with the ladies, discuss their talents, bring music for them to use during their performance.....this was a production, not just an event, and she was the producer!

"I wanted to put on this program for them because I was once in their shoes. I was a single mom with four children and didn't have any where to go.



***Fearfully
And
Wonderfully
Made***



Unfortunately, I did not know about a place such as First Light shelter. God gave me peace in the midst of all that I went through, didn't have, and wanted to be. He gave me the wisdom, knowledge, and understanding I needed to know that He had my situation all under control. No matter how it looked- I was somebody, and someone loved me. Just to see the faces of the ladies at the shelter the day of the show was God's gift to me. The way they bonded together, showed each other love, and cried together. You don't know how big something so small can be to a person. I was blessed to have so many people to support my vision to make these women feel loved. There are many companies and individuals who donated to this remarkable event."

The first annual talent show was held on February 16th and several of the women staying at First Light participated- in song, in dance, in spirit. The afternoon went off without a hitch. The day room was decorated beautifully with balloons, table cloths, Valentine's sweetheart candy and rose petals; the ladies wore their matching "First Annual First Light Talent Show" t-shirts; the volunteers handed out tote bags full of surprise goodies; and the women sang and danced their hearts out!

* Volunteer of the Month *
* January 2008—Kim Dowe-Kirksey *
* The breakfast volunteer who cooks the ladies steak *
* and eggs, chicken and waffles and makes them *
* feel extra-special! *
* February 2008—LaKeshia Dunson, Doers of the Word *
* Christian Ministry Outreach *
* The dinner volunteer so touched by the guests *
* that she organized the *first* First Light talent *
* show! *
* March 2008—Stacey Norwood *
* The volunteer who organized an Easter fun activity *
* for the women, allowing them to make Easter bas- *
* kets for their children and grandchildren! *
* April 2008—Rosie Montgomery *
* The Bible Study Leader who comes to First Light *
* every Sunday evening to bring a message of hope *
* and healing to our guests, nurturing their spiri- *
* tual needs. *

***Special Thanks to the following for their gener-
ous support of First Light:***

The Independent Presbyterian Church Foundation
The South Highland Presbyterian Church Foundation
Protective Life Insurance Company

Thank You

Special thanks to Kimberly Hain- a member of the Cathedral of Saint Paul, an FL volunteer and CEO of Mail Fast- for donating the printing and mailing of the FL newsletter beginning with this issue. This is a generous gift and will allow us to spend printing dollars on some other new projects this year. Thank you, thank you, thank you!!



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First Light Art Shop
2230 4th Avenue North
Birmingham, AL 35203

Open Fridays, 9:00AM-3:00PM

When you need a gift this spring, please stop by the art shop & support our ladies! Handmade items by our guests include:

- Beaded cross necklaces
- Mosaic tile garden items
- Creative bulletin boards in soft, designer colors
 - Artist note cards for all occasions
 - Original paintings
- Colorful First Light Tee Shirts
- Large beaded crosses for Confirmation, Mother's Day, baby's room or to hang on wall or in window

First Light Center provides hospitality, shelter and essential services to homeless women & children. All proceeds from the Art Shop go to support the center.

Call for information: 323-4277