



# FIRST LIGHT

A CENTER FOR HOMELESS WOMEN AND CHILDREN

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# FIRST LIGHT

A CENTER FOR HOMELESS WOMEN AND CHILDREN

# THE LIGHT

Fall 2008 Edition

OFFERING HOPE • PROVIDING OPPORTUNITY • CONFIRMING DIGNITY • ENSURING SAFETY • ESTABLISHING COMMUNITY • DEMONSTRATING HOSPITALITY

The following tells the REAL First Light story. Thousands of women have come and gone and they are why First Light is here. What follows is just one woman's journey. It is real...the name has been changed and some details have been left out. Know this...you play a direct role in this woman's life by way of your financial contributions and time. Your generosity makes a difference! We need you!! Our guests need you....here's why:

Mary awakens at 5:00 AM. As she opens her eyes it doesn't take long to remember...she's living in a Shelter for homeless women. She shuffles around to her locker, pulls her uniform from the shelf and heads to the communal bathroom to dress and put on her makeup. She tries to be quiet since the other 36 women are not awake yet. "One day at a time," she reminds herself. Mary straightens the pillow and blanket covering her mattress, grabs her book bag and heads downstairs to eat some peanut butter toast and an apple. Reaching into her bag for keys, she utters a silent prayer of thanks that since going back to work she has saved up enough to buy a clunker of a car. Before the car, she had to race to the bus stop, hoping and praying it would be on time and not break down on the way to the dentist's office where she is a dental hygienist. Throughout the day she converses with her patients, asks about their children...small talk, but it's a pleasant reminder of the life she knew before her own life plummeted, landing her at First Light several months ago.

Mary's children are with her parents. Since she has been doing so well, she now has visits with the kids, and has a clear plan for when she will regain custody. Mary is a candidate in First Light's Shelter + Care program, wherein she will receive housing vouchers to pay for an apartment. Her Social Worker will accompany her every step of the way as she moves closer toward an apartment inspection by the Jefferson County Housing Authority, and finally...her own living space! The Social Worker will monitor her ongoing progress to help her stay on track for the next couple of years. Mary knows, in her own mind, that she is ready to take control, and will not be in the program indefinitely...she will move past the need for supportive care.

Mary is regaining her self esteem...reclaiming her life. She has conquered several demons in the past year, not to mention the bout with breast cancer. She is focused on a healthy future and life with her children. There is no sulking, there is no complaining. Instead, there is a quiet determination that she is okay now, she will have her life back and watch her children grow up, providing the best she can for them.

She drives back to First Light at day's end. When she enters the lobby she sees a younger woman there with two small children, and another woman in tears, talking with a social worker about sleeping on the floor tonight in the Overflow. "Not so long ago that was me,"

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for THANKSGIVING

## Volunteer of the Month

July 2008



*Tiffany Chiang*

Fairfield Highlands Presbyterian Church

August 2008



*Elaine Hipps*

Bluff Park United Methodist Church

September 2008



*Kristin Johnson*

Bluff Park United Methodist Church

### Board of Directors

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### First Light Staff

Ruth G. Crosby, Executive Director  
Deborah B. Everson, Assistant Director  
Sherry J. Webb, LBSW, MSW, Director of Social Services  
Shannon T. Horsley, Volunteer Manager  
Francis Crowder, MSW, Social Worker  
Sarah B. Greer, LBSW, Social Worker  
Melody Jenkins, BSW, Social Worker  
Elayne Patterson, BSW, Social Worker  
Chaquita Pendleton, BSW, Social Worker  
April M. Graham, Shelter Manager  
Marilyn Gross, Art Therapy Coordinator  
Osarieme Erhunmwunsee, Shelter Assistant  
Deborah Jackson, Shelter Assistant  
Therese O'Hara, Shelter Assistant  
Yvonne Hardy, Weekend Supervisor





Things are interesting. How shall we say it? Three reporters have called in the past month to ask about how economic conditions are affecting homelessness. You may have heard the interview done on WBHM by Les Lavoy. Anyone who lives precariously from one paycheck to the next is at risk. Women who have been surviving by the skin of their teeth, so to speak, lose their job or the car breaks down and that's it. A downward spiral.

I'll be honest. As I sat talking with him, the more probing his questions, the more animated I got. I was trying to make him see, though, that the homeless have been here all along.... NOW, because so many more people are vulnerable, homeless shelters have gotten some more attention. Truthfully, what's happening in our economy threatens more people and it threatens the operation of a small nonprofit like First Light in a big way.

At one point Les began to get personal....asking how it feels when we are at full capacity even in the Overflow shelter and have to turn a woman away. That's when it happened...I choked up. It was a surprise to me, but I choked. You cannot sit at the front desk facing a woman who is telling you she has nowhere else to go and be unaffected by this. And if we are full, ...there is no simple way to describe to you the scene of a woman walking out that door after she found the courage to walk in to ask for help.

SO, yes, I choked. I'm glad he didn't leave that in the segment he did. But I want you to know....our income is down and we are looking ahead at what might have to happen if contributions and grants and donations don't come in. I am not ashamed of one tear I or other staff members have shed here...a human response to what our guests are going through is appropriate. And I think every tear shed by our guests in this building is sacred. But if we have to cut back on the services we provide....well, there will be a lot more tears all around. Our Overflow was set up to alleviate the problem of having every bed full every night.

Right now we are cutting back on every single area of spending. We have even started shopping at retail outlets instead of having milk, bread and cereal delivered, in order to find less expensive staples to have for breakfast and eliminate delivery fees. We have started asking for donations of breakfast foods so we don't have to buy them. These are "budget relieving" measures.

While we are all affected by economic developments this year, I know this: having food, shelter and the prospect of a better life...these are basic human rights. And this may be a time when those of us who contribute to the poor give, not from our surplus, but from our own needs. We recognize this and never forget your generosity.

dbe



Budget-Relieving Wish List

- |                                    |                           |                                 |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 8.5X11 white copy paper            | Milk - 2%                 | Napkins                         |
| Blue and black ink pens            | Coffee creamer            | Gift cards to Block Buster or   |
| White-out                          | Sugar                     | Movie Gallery for movie therapy |
| <b>Breakfast foods:</b>            | Breakfast or granola bars | Snack items for group therapies |
| Individual pkts of instant oatmeal | <b>Disposable goods:</b>  | Bleach                          |
| Individual pkts of instant grits   | Plates                    | Over the Counter meds           |
| Generic, bulk cereals              | Bowls                     | Wash cloths                     |
| Fresh or canned fruit              | Cups                      | Kitchen towels                  |
| Fruit juice                        | Forks, spoons, knives     |                                 |

Tis the Season... for THANKSGIVING

*Below is a selection of comments taken from First Light's Overnight Volunteer Journal. Our volunteers are usually so grateful for having spent the night here to assist our guests. It ends up being a bountiful blessing for them. In this season of giving thanks, it is wise to ponder what we have rather than what we do not have.*

- "I am so grateful that I had the opportunity to meet these women. It has been an eye-opening experience and I hope to come back whenever I can. Everyone was so friendly and compliant. I wish the best for these ladies. They have taught me not to take anything for granted."
- "This has truly been a blessing for me to be able to come to First Light and stay overnight with the ladies here. They have been so nice and helpful. I had been looking for a place to volunteer and I think I have found it. Seeing these ladies makes me stop and count my blessings. I realize that I could have been one of them, but thankfully my life has been on a different road. I pray for all of them that theirs will take a different and better path."
- "Wonderful night. Everyone was so sweet! My mom had knitted booties, enough for everyone. We went bed to bed handing them out. Right before bed, we heard a small noise at the door, we opened it to find no one- but a card. It was so heart-warming to open the card and see all the ladies had signed it and written sweet notes of thanks. Very unexpected- they even wrote my mom's name on the card. Very nice night with some wonderful ladies."
- "We all need a reminder of how fortunate we are. We all struggle, but life leads us in different paths. My experience at First Light was a good one. I see women who are struggling, but making the most of their situation. There's a lot to be taken from that! God bless!"
- "This is my third night here and I have enjoyed my stay. All of the ladies are sweet and have gotten along with each other. This has truly been an eye-opener and has made me realize how grateful I am and to never take anything for granted."
- "This is my first night as a volunteer at First Light and I must say it has truly been a blessing serving these ladies. They are grateful and kind-hearted. I have been ministering on Thursday nights for over a year and God laid it on my heart to volunteer and I'm truly glad I did. God willing, this will not be the last time. God bless First Light for your services to these precious souls. I also want to say that I am truly impressed with the cleanliness and seeing how organized everything is- I felt right at home."
- "This is my second night here and it has been such a breath of fresh air. I have never been involved with anything like this, and it has been such an experience. These ladies are very thankful for what they have, as they should be. This is a wonderful organization. I would like to return someday with my daughter when she is a little older."



## How can you help a woman in the Shelter + Care program?

Please call Deb Everson at 323-4277 before bringing large items.  
Timing is everything— We don't have a lot of space at First Light.

Bed	Cooking pot	Spatula
Basic furniture	Baking sheet	Drinking glasses
Sheets	4-piece place setting of dishes	Bath towels, wash cloths
Blanket	4-piece place setting of silverware	Cleaning supplies and cleaning cloths
Pillows	Can opener	Powder laundry detergent
Small TV	Ice trays	

Once First Light routinely began to experience full capacity on second floor in the Emergency Shelter, we quickly found a way to accommodate those who still appeared at our door needing shelter. We acquired mats and converted the Day Room and Dining Room into what we call "Overflow Shelter," in essence, making this dual purpose space so that we would not have to turn women away during the night. Serving up to 50 was bumped up to serving up to 62 on any given night, depending on how many women and children stayed in the Overflow.

In an attempt to alleviate the pressure on our resources and our staff, we sought two different grants that would allow us to provide permanent supportive housing for up to 68 women over the course of a three year period. That's the ticket! We can eliminate the need for sleeping on the floor because we will find apartments and provide intensive case management. That's it—we will have fewer at the front door because we are accompanying them out the back door to permanent housing scenarios.

What happened - Where are we now?? (a) the Overflow was available for "up to 15" women and children - this number is exceeded night after night. By 11 AM every morning we already have 15 names on our Overflow List and are calling other shelters to see if they have beds. They usually don't. By 5 PM we have 18-20 names on the list. We are now telling our dinner volunteers to cook dinner not for 62 women and children, but up to 70. (b) while we do see repeat visitors on occasion, these are primarily NEW faces, and many are mothers with children. Just last week we had 8 children sleeping on our floor!! (c) summer used to be a time when the Overflow census was down. This was NOT the case. The Overflow was full all summer.

The questions are.....what is going to happen once the weather turns cold? How many more women and children will be losing their current housing situations as money dries up, jobs are lost or relatives can no longer help? How will First Light support MORE guests with higher costs and declining contributions?

Our mothers taught us that if you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all. And the wise know that instead of presenting problems to people you should talk about solutions. So here goes --

Isn't it great that First Light is here? Isn't it wonderful that the only 24 hour emergency shelter in Birmingham has been able to adapt and accept more and more women and children as our economic times are presenting even more faces desperately in need of the help we provide?

First Light is doing all the right things. When you try to do more with less money...eventually some cutbacks have to be made. We created a "budget relieving wish list" as a way to supplement the breakfast supplies First Light provides to our guests. (A loyal host of Volunteers prepare and serve dinner every night.) The donations of breakfast supplies are helping—thank you! We have stepped up our grant requests and solicitations for corporate/foundation giving to our operations. We have revised our purchasing of supplies by seeking products and services at lesser costs. Whenever possible, we go to pick things up rather than pay a delivery fee.

We are responsible to our mission—it is the touchstone for all we do. And we have been entrusted by you, our volunteers and supporters, to be good stewards of all revenue. And we are. Thanks for being part of this very special agency.

## Iron Bowl Pancake Breakfast

Win one of three (3) prizes at this new and fun pancake breakfast event. For \$5.00 you can enjoy a full pancake breakfast the weekend before the Iron Bowl. A \$10 raffle ticket offers the chance to win one of three different prizes: Auburn/Alabama game ticket package (2 tickets) OR a television OR a tailgate party. There will be NUMEROUS door prizes, many of which are Bama/Auburn related. Hint: autographed footballs, Roll Tide or War Eagle sports items, a sapling from the Toomer's Corner tree; "SaBan" sunglasses, to name a few. Other items include dinner at Firebirds, Bonefish Grill, golf at Ballantrae or Mountain View, a night at the Tutwiler or Hyatt Place Inverness...many others!

Breakfast and Raffle tickets are available now through the breakfast itself on Saturday November 22nd.

RECAP: **What** - Iron Bowl Pancake Breakfast

**When** - Saturday, November 22, 8:00 -10:30 AM

**Where** - Golden Rule in Lakeview at 29th Street and University

**Cost** - \$5 breakfast ticket; Raffle tickets @ \$10 each

**TICKETS:** at First Light, First Presbyterian Church, Independent Presbyterian Church, Ruth, Deb or First Light Board members.

## Slingfest '08

Magic City Slingfest hosted by Babywearing International of Birmingham



*Magic City*  
**Slingfest '08**  
In Celebration of International Babywearing Week

Babywearing International of Birmingham is hosting the first-ever annual fundraiser called the Magic City Slingfest to benefit First Light in a few short weeks! Babywearing International of Birmingham is a non-profit organization whose mission is to promote babywearing as a universally accepted practice, with benefits for both child and caregiver, through education and support. (Babywearing can be defined as keeping your baby close to your body and your own hands free by using baby slings and carriers.) You may visit [www.magiccityslingfest.com](http://www.magiccityslingfest.com) for more information.

**What?** Magic City Slingfest

**When?** Saturday, November 15th from 12-4pm

**Where?** Vulcan Park

**Cost?** Free for the whole family to attend!

Includes: Fashion Show, \$5 DIY Sling Table, Babywearing Consults, Kindermusik by the Pink House Demonstrations, and much more!

## Question: How has First Light Helped You?

I am 57 years old and was independent and self supportive for 14 years until I lost my job. My life fell apart and spiraled into alcoholism and severe depression with bi-polar episodes. First Light has fed me, bedded me and given me resources, I never knew about to give me a new start and beginning in life. I am appreciative and will never forget the hospitality from First Light!





## Art Show at First Presbyterian Church

First Light and First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham

Present

**"Healing Hearts with Art"**  
Art Work by the Women of First Light

Reception  
Sunday, December 7th  
2:00-4:00PM

The Sacred Art Gallery of First Presbyterian Church  
2100 Fourth Avenue North

Works will hang through January



look. She smiles to herself as she heads to the Day Room, all the while thinking..."thank God for First Light. Where would I be if not for them?"

After dinner Mary heads up the steps to second floor with all the others staying in First Light's Emergency Shelter. She is one of many to walk these steps and she knows she will be followed by many other women who need the help only First Light can provide. As she prepares herself for bedtime she converses with the others, then silently prepares her work clothes for the next day. Mary knows that this is coming to an end soon. As she lies down she acknowledges to herself that while she is excited about her future, she feels a real peace about the time she has spent preparing herself, working through issues with her social worker, paying off her fines and seeing her probation officer.... It has been a real journey, in so many ways, and worth the wait. Her kids deserve her best and she is ready to give that to them. She finally feels good about herself. She has control of her life and a career that holds promise for financial stability, which is not the case for many of those sleeping near her at this moment. Eventually she nods off. 5:00 AM will be coming soon.

dbe

## Christmas Gift Wish List

If you wish to collect an item to be included in the guests' Christmas gift bags, please contact Shannon Horsley at 205-323-4277 or shannon.horsley@firstlightshelter.org. The deadline for delivering Christmas gifts will be December 19th.

## Blue Light art Show & Empty Bowls Event

Tena Payne has been a regular artist contributor to our annual Gala art auction for several years. On Saturday, December 13th she is having an "Empty Bowls" event at her "Earthborn Studios" in Leeds. Artists from the community will have their creations available at discounted pricing just in time for holiday gift giving. In addition, there will be soups available to visitors and customers which can be purchased for a small donation. These proceeds will be passed on to First Light.

**What** - discounted pottery/art sale and fund raiser for First Light

**When** - December 13-14th

**Where** - Earthborn Studios, Artisan Dinnerware  
7575 Parkway Dr. Leeds, AL 35094

For more information:

205-702-7055,

www.earthbornpottery.net

(continued from page 1)

she pledges to always remember. The dinner volunteers are here...she knows because the smell of ham warming in the oven is wafting out into the hallway. She pauses and makes eye contact with the two women in the lobby with an assuring

## It's Almost Time For Holiday Lights!

Holiday Lights is an annual fundraiser through which people make a tax-deductible contribution to First Light in honor of or in memory of a loved one or esteemed associate. Staff then mails a holiday greeting card to the honoree or honoree's family advising them that a gift has been given in their honor or in memory of their loved one. What makes this project special is that First Light staff signs the cards and addresses each envelope by hand, which makes it a very personal way of honoring others. This project continues to grow and seems to be a particularly meaningful way to donate to this important cause.

Last year, the Holiday Lights fundraiser brought over \$20,000 to the agency! Donations can be made in person at First Light, by mail, or online beginning November 10th, 2008. NOTE: things get pretty busy here with holiday giving to our guests. Please submit your lists early so we can get the cards addressed and mailed in time for the holidays.



## Tidbits of INFORMATION:

- 7,990 ...the number of volunteer hours served at First Light in 2007-2008

- 1,040...the number of women and children served in Emergency and Overflow Emergency Shelter in 2007-2008. 865 were adults; 175 were children

- 104....the number of families served in 2007-2008

- 252...the number of women who left from our Overflow shelter to go to other shelters because we did not have enough beds for them. Some women stay 2-3 weeks on our floor waiting for a bed either at First Light or another shelter

## Where does the money come from?

Grants: 43%  
Special Events: 23% (our own fundraising effort)  
Individual Contributions: 11%  
Church/Civic: 10%  
Foundations & Corporations: 7%  
Programs: 4%  
Miscellaneous: 2%

Where does the money go?  
Emergency Shelter: 53%  
Permanent Supportive Housing: 37%  
Management and General: 10%