

Love at First Light:

The Story of a Shelter for Homeless Women and Children

The time came for us to stop relying on our oral history and put the First Light story down on paper. Last Spring, we looked ahead to celebrating the ten year anniversary of moving into our building in a special way: a book that tells our history and more importantly, our story.

The economic and political culture of Birmingham in the 80's was such that individuals were once again being called to a greater awareness of the social problems of their community. The downtown business and church communities found themselves face to face with homeless men and women sleeping in their courtyards, digging food from their dumpsters, seeking shelter in their store fronts and back alleys. It made us feel uncomfortable, perhaps, but there were those who knew how best to respond: with compassion and love.

There are too many people to recognize and thank here for their willingness to take risks and to step out in faith to provide some solutions to meeting the challenge of helping the homeless in Birmingham. Our book is an attempt to give witness to those individuals who responded with "I will go" when asked "whom shall I send?" Most importantly, *Love at First Light* is a testimony about women and children who looked to us for help because they desperately needed it. Moreover, it is a statement of praise to all our guests...from the past to the present, who have shown us indescribable stamina and hope in the face of perils and obstacles most of us will never know.

Ellen Dossett, Ph.D., local educator, psychologist and author of *Just As I Am: Americans with Disabilities*, was asked to pen the story. Over the past ten months,



Ellen has interviewed people who were there at the beginning when First Presbyterian Church offered its basement as a temporary night shelter for women and children. She has spoken with early volunteers who came with food and spent the night...when you had to go to the security guard at the Birmingham News to unlock the door! From current staff members, to Miss Jeannie, long time residents and current guests, to those people who served on the capital campaign to renovate the old Granada Hotel, Ellen has discovered a story rich with purpose, love and dedication. We have told her First Light has been surrounded with grace since its very inception. She has seen and heard why the story is so important.

From creating hospitality and a safe place in a basement for 15 women and facing 30 who came, to the decision to create a more structured environment and place where social services could be provided that would truly have a deep impact on lives...it's all there. Interestingly enough, we are back in the same situation—the second floor is no longer enough space for all

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those who come and we are sleeping women and children on the floor again. History repeats itself.

Wynter Byrd, a nationally recognized photographer and former First Light employee and volunteer, has done the photography for the book. Wynter knows First Light—she “gets” it, and she knows how to tell a story with pictures. We came in some mornings to learn she had been here at 6:30 AM to capture images of the women preparing for their day. She made dinner for 4th floor residents to renew her relationship with them before taking their pictures. She has visited our former guests in their apartments, taken pictures of the building from on top of the YWCA....she is very enthusiastic about her work!

Love at First Light should be available by May 1, the day of this year's Gala. We expect to have a special copy available in the Live Auction which has been signed by the author and many individuals whose involvement with the agency has been documented within.

The proceeds from the book will go into our endowment fund - to keep the love and light coming for all future guests! Truly, the story needed to be documented and shared. It is pure grace and guts that took a dark and dank basement and converted it into a place of light and life and hope. And then years later, made it happen again, by taking an abandoned hotel being used for bad habits and prostitution and turning it into a residence and life-giving center for homeless women and children. Anyone who has had anything to do with First Light knows it is a powerful story. They will most likely agree that it has improved the lives of many women and children, and truth be told, all those who have volunteered, contributed and worked here over the years.

(Books will be available at the Gala on May 1 and immediately thereafter. Contact Deb Everson at deborah.everson@firstlightshelter.org to purchase copies after May 1.)

Volunteer of the Month

October 2009

Christina Lupo

Christina Lupo - UAB student who regularly spends the night at First Light, also volunteered for the Pre-Iron Bowl Pancake Breakfast.

November 2009

Bryan Bonds

Member of Brookwood Baptist Church who coordinated Thanksgiving baskets for every single woman in our permanent housing programs, and sweat suits for the ladies' Christmas gift bags. Always asking "what can we do?"

December 2009

Lindsey Hull

UAB Golden Girls, Stan Washer and Rachael Wigington - Together, this group got our ladies in the Christmas spirit. They brought Christmas crafts and snacks, played games with the ladies. Stan was the first SANTA to ever come to First Light, and Rachael photographed each woman with Santa and brought back prints for the ladies.

January 2010

Maria Costa

Brasfield & Gorrie employee who volunteers overnight a few times a month, often when there is a last-minute need.

February 2010

Rev. Kay Lawrence

Kay is fairly new to town and has jumped into First Light head-first- setting up a weekly chapel service for our guests. The ladies love her, and she is a joy to work with. Thank you for your enthusiasm Kay!

March 2010

Allison Seamon

Independent Presbyterian Church member who has given much of her time to First Light during the month of March. Allison has played games with the ladies, played Wii with the fourth floor ladies, taught a class on getting a job, done clerical work like filing, and has taken photos of the art being auctioned at the gala! Thank you for your enthusiasm and willingness to help Allison!

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2010 Gala BUILDING FOUNDATIONS



Mark your calendars for the 12th Annual First Light Gala to be held May 1, 2010, at the Doubletree Hotel (808 20th Street South in Birmingham).

The 12th annual Gala will be a multipurpose event: we will be honoring our volunteers, raising much needed funds and celebrating ten years in our current location!! As noted elsewhere in this newsletter, to enhance the celebration, we are launching our book, Love at First Light: the story of a shelter for homeless women and children.

Registration and the silent auction begin at 6:30. At 8:00 p.m. there will be a seated dinner and the presentation of the Honoree of the Year and Volunteer of the Year, followed by a live auction. With Christie King as the auctioneer, you are in for a fast-paced, fun-packed evening - with plenty of opportunities to purchase the art of prominent local and national artists, fine wine, and fantastic travel and vacation packages.

This year's gala will honor First Presbyterian Church, as Honoree of the Year. First Presbyterian Church is where the First Light Shelter began in 1983 and operated for 17 years before moving to its current location at 2230 Fourth Avenue North. This year's Volunteer of the Year is Rosie Montgomery. Among other things, Rosie has conducted a Bible study class every week for 9 years!

A sampling of contributors to Gala Art Auction known at Press Time...

Becky Bolton Crisswell • Kim Graham • Barton Clay Jewelers • Frank Stiff • Meredith Keith • Jennifer Harwell • Buffy Hargett • Four Seasons Antiques and Art • Betsy Miree • Alabama Symphony • Donna Leigh Jackins • Tres Taylor • David Joseph Self • Michael Marlowe • Carol Misner • Darrell Ezekiel • Anne Reiser • Nall • Susan Brown Freeman • Tena Payne • Mary Lynn Robbins • Workplay • Debra Riffe • Mary Ann Kohn • Echelon Catering • The Fitness Center • Thirty One • Beach Condo • McWane Science Center • The Wine Loft • Susan Jackson • Connie Henson • Margaret Fleenor • Good Jewelry • Ethel Owen • Gerda Carmichael • Richard Tubb Interiors • Froniera • Sally Wood Johnson • Galaica Designs • Opera Birmingham • Birmingham Museum of Art • Duffy's Garage • Tacky Jack's Massage • Salon U • Quizno's • Sol Y Luna • Amasa Smith • Sandy Stephens • Trak Shak • Pet Portraits by Judy • SilverIron Café • Joseph Longoria • Ann Phillips • Zanaida Griffin • Melanie Howell • Mosaic Moons • Jan Cash Jewelry • Robert Hill Antiques • Suzanne Chenoweth • M's Fabrics and CD LTD • Barbara Prior • Contri Brothers • Ritz-Carlton Atlanta • Learning ExpressToys • Dande' Lion • LETTERS • S. Mark Roberts • Christopher Glen Inc • Libby Wright • Fred Astaire Dance Studio

Gala Sponsorships known at press time...

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Medical Properties Trust
Richard Tubb Interiors
Saint Francis Xavier Catholic Church
Emma Taylor and Ed Carrick
Mike and Anne Warren

Tickets are \$150 each and are on sale now! Table and event sponsorships are also available. To order tickets, or make a contribution please contact Deb Everson at Deborah.Everson@firstlightshelter.org or call 323-4277.

NOTE: For your convenience, tickets may be purchased online at www.firstlightshelter.org.



Emma Taylor, Lanita Engates and Nancy Skinner with a few art auction items.

FOOD

FOR

THOUGHT

by Deb

I have a picture of my Mother on the bulletin board in my office. I pause to look at the photo and, of course, a flood of memories rushes in. My mother was a woman of faith. She was the hardest worker I have ever known. After my father went to heaven I walked to church with her every Sunday because she didn't drive. I saw her bake, cook, sweat to raise money for our church. She and my dad literally helped build our very small Catholic Church in Brilliant, Ohio. An uneducated woman and a child of immigrant parents from Czechoslovakia and Russia, Mary Everson stood tall in her faith community and in our little village. I helped her dust the pews and vacuum the carpet in the church. There was no such thing as a cleaning staff. The women of the church did it. I have never known another woman with the same work ethic. Home or church, it made no difference. Get the work done.

First Light reminds me of that little church in Brilliant a lot. A small community where women met most of the needs, and truth be told, the women ran the place. Whatever needs to be done, whenever it needs to be done. No task left undone. No task beneath you.

First Light is probably a parallel universe to that little community. We are a small staff of women helping women in need. We have stability in operations many nonprofits don't enjoy. We have an excellent reputation with vendors who know they will be paid and they sure know Ruth expects their work to be done properly or they will hear about it. It is probably fair to say she is thinking about First Light 24 hours a day. And it's always about First Light being its best. Nobody on the staff is above picking up a mop or a broom...Ruth sets that example daily.

So, I feel doubly, triply blessed. I know women who are giants when it comes to fidelity to something they believe in..... no matter the cost to self. I see in my friend Ruth what I did in my Mother, and now in my niece who is so much like her grandmother—sacrifice of self for others. Another example is Rosie Montgomery—the woman we honor as Volunteer of the Year at the Gala on May 1st. She shares her faith with our guests through prayer and Scripture study. The world is truly a better place because of women like this. What we offer our guests here is a second chance at life. The social workers help the women look at what brought them to homelessness and what needs to be done from these moments on. Quietly, in the background are women like Ruth and Rosie showing strength, stability, faith and fidelity. Perhaps our guests saw it in their own mothers and grandmothers. It is a powerful example and gift, and not one that is lost on the ladies who come in and out of our doors.

So, as we approach May 2010 we celebrate ten years in this building with our Gala and we pay homage to our history with a new book. We honor Rosie Montgomery for her fidelity to sharing her faith and her sacrifice to spend time with our ladies every Sunday evening for nine years. We celebrate First Presbyterian Church because they created the standards and the path for us to follow. On that glorious Saturday night in May we will all be scurrying around to make sure things get done. That's what we do. Get things done. Because we believe in what we are doing. Thanks for the example you have given to me Mom, Ruth, First Presbyterian Church members, Rosie..... it is pure gift.

Chris Clark Visits First Light



Chris Clark, Telma and Brenda

In March, renowned Birmingham visionary folk artist, Chris Clark, visited the First Light weekly art class and brought his amazing hand-sewn story quilts and colorful “Spirit Sticks” to share with participants. His work is in the permanent collection at the Birmingham Museum of Art, the Museum of American Folk Art in New York and the Smithsonian Museum. Chris believes the inspiration for his “Spirit Sticks” came to him in a vision. After relating his touching personal story, our ladies were inspired to paint and decorate tree limbs with bright designs, tribal symbols and interesting objects. The spirit sticks, along with colorful papier mache masks, are displayed in the first floor Women’s Art Gallery. This new installation reflects the imagination and creative energy of our wonderful women. Stop by the center anytime and enjoy their creative efforts!

Marilyn Gross, Art Coordinator

Spirit Stick



Spirit Stick



*Heavenly Woman
(mask)*



Spirit Sticks



Thanks!

- * Two anonymous contributors who have covered the majority of the cost of production, enabling us to direct all book sales to our Bill and Weesa Matthews Endowment Fund
- * Earthborn Studios and Cahaba ClayWorks for the EMPTY BOWLS fundraiser.
- * Cathedral Church of the Advent
- * Leeds Presbyterian Church
- * Robert R. Meyer Foundation
- * The Daniel Foundation
- * IPC Foundation
- * Everyone and every business that contributed gifts for Christmas. Innumerable individuals, families, offices, businesses and small groups rallied together to provide Christmas gifts for EVERY SINGLE WOMAN and child served by First Light. Volunteers came to First Light to pack the gift bags, distribute the gift bags, bring and serve breakfast, have a Christmas-morning communion service, do Christmas arts and crafts with the ladies.
- * Magic City Choral Society for a supply drive and a recent afternoon of karaoke
- * Bob and Janet for the Wii games and Wii Fit for our 4th floor residents
- * Rep. Patricia Todd for speaking to the board of directors at their retreat
- * 9-year-old Lauren from Trussville, for coming up with the idea to collect and paint pine cones, and then sell them to benefit First Light. After going door-to-door selling these pine cones, she raised about \$1400 for us!

Facebook - Become Our Fan!

First Light now has joined the social networking craze. This actually has been quite helpful because we can post photos or a quick comment that is immediately accessible to those who are our “Fans.” It is much more personal. We have created some photo albums that show off visitors or events here, such as the Stubb’s BarBQue visitors in June. We can post a need that may get a quick response, such as the need for glucose test strips. We had the strips within 4 days!

So, please, check out our Facebook page at <http://facebook.firstlightshelter.org> and become our fan! You will receive email notification when we post something, and then, if you choose, you can click on the site to see photos or investigate what else has been happening.

Breakfast foods:

Individual packets of instant oatmeal (no bulk containers please)
Individual packets of instant grits (no bulk containers please)
Generic, bulk cereals (like Honey Nut Cheerios and Fruit Loops)
Fresh or canned fruit
Fruit juice
Sugar
Breakfast or granola bars
Plastic containers of peanut butter and jelly
Decaf Coffee
Gift cards to Block Buster or Movie Gallery for movie therapy
Snack items for group therapies
Wash cloths
Kitchen towels

Hygiene and personal items

(new and unopened packages only, please)

Cold, sinus and allergy medicines (nothing with Benadryl or alcohol)
Cough drops
Children's over the counter medications
Over the counter stomach/antacid or pain medications
Lip balm
Boxes of Kleenex
Note pads and pens
Small bottles of hand lotion
Travel size shampoo, soaps
Deodorant
Feminine products (tampons, pads)

Please know that these are used on an ongoing basis so we ALWAYS need these items. You could consider gathering things as a family project or as a group. They can be brought to First Light on a monthly basis—whatever works best for you.

We are located at the corner of 4th Avenue North and 23rd Street in downtown Birmingham, between the downtown Post Office and The Birmingham News. You can park in the loading zone on 4th, and we will help you unload!

Wish list for a woman moving into apartment:

Skillet
Kitchen utensils
Flatware
Set of dishes (setting for 4)
Pots and pans
Kitchen towels and dish cloths
Set of bath towels
Pillow, Comforter/blanket for double bed
Toaster
Coffee pot



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FIRST LIGHT

A CENTER FOR HOMELESS WOMEN AND CHILDREN

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