



Homefirst

INTERFAITH HOUSING & FAMILY SERVICES

SPRING/SUMMER 2009

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Homefirst is in Good Hands *By Kim Lionetti*

Homefirst’s new Executive Director Ellen McGovern is aware of the challenges Homefirst faces in today’s difficult economy. Armed with a new mission statement and years of experience in housing and community service she is eager for the challenge.

“As a lifelong resident of Union County, I was eager to give back to my community with an organization that is rooted here,” Ellen said. Her impressive background and extensive experience in supportive housing and community service makes her a valuable asset to the team.

A resident of Cranford, Ellen has BSW and MSW degrees from Rutgers University and is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. Formerly Associate Executive Director at the YWCA of Eastern Union County in Elizabeth, she was responsible for the development and oversight of programs that serve victims/survivors of domestic violence. In addition, Ellen has served as Director of Operations and Housing Development with the New Jersey Community Development Corporation in Paterson, N.J.; Director of Housing with St. Paul’s Community Development Corp. in Paterson; a Housing Development Specialist with The Metro Company, LLC in Jersey City, N.J.; and Executive Director of Homeless Solutions, Inc. in Morristown, N.J.

Ellen and Casey Woodruff, who took the helm as board president in January, know first hand that in today’s tough economy, there are more people in need of Homefirst’s services than ever before. With an eye toward expanding their initiatives in Union County



and beyond, Homefirst launched this new mission statement in 2008:

Homefirst is dedicated to improving the quality of life for the homeless. Valuing our strong partnership with the faith community, we promote personal development, independence and self-sufficiency, as well as community building for safe and stable neighborhoods through a broad continuum of housing and related social service programs.

“We’re seeing families come to us that have never been in this position before,” Ellen says. “Middle class families are falling on hard times and being priced out of their homes. With the increase in foreclosures, we’re seeing a significant increase in demand for our assistance.”

Casey is enthusiastic about the strides Homefirst has made in the past year. “In 2008, the board, in conjunction with staff and stakeholders (including clients, donors and local officials) developed a three-year strategic plan for the agency. Our goal for 2009 and beyond is to implement the priorities developed as

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Prior to needing Homefirst's help, Arlischer graduated from high school and attended college before taking a job at Blue Cross & Blue Shield, a position she held for seven years. After her office was downsized and she was laid off, Arlischer eventually found herself in a situation she describes as "hopeless."

Job losses in 2008 reached 2.6 million, their highest level in more than six decades. The number of Americans working part-time jobs, because of reduced hours or because of a lack of full-time work, rose to eight million. In our worsening economic climate, we all can relate to stories like Arlischer's more than ever before.

"Homefirst put me in a position to see that I could begin rebuilding my life," Arlischer said, "I am now a stable, responsible parent, sister, friend, daughter, and community servant." Arlischer became a Homefirst client in 2001 when she moved into a Supportive Housing unit, where she currently lives with her son.

With a weakened economy, finding and maintaining affordable housing is becoming increasingly difficult for families in Union County, Homefirst's housing programs served 802 people in 2008, a 28% increase from 2007. As



families face harder times and demand for housing and social service programs grows, the value of Homefirst's mission in Plainfield and the surrounding communities becomes clearer.

To the growing number of Americans heading toward that "hopeless" place, Arlischer says, "Never give up. There are a lot of people that genuinely care if you are willing to do the work. The people who work at Homefirst are not there to judge you or to put a stigma on you. Never give up hope!"

The Fair Market Rent (FMR) of a 2 bedroom apartment in Union County is \$1,213.00*

In a one adult household with the parent making minimum wage the parent would have to work a minimum of 131 hours per week with no time off for holidays or illness, in order to afford a 2 bedroom apartment in Union County.

** 2009 New Jersey Housing Out of Reach survey conducted by the National Low Income Housing Coalition*

Good Hands *Continued from page 1*

part of that plan." This plan aims at revitalizing and strengthening the Interfaith Hospitality Network (IHN) shelter program, increasing access to long term affordable housing, developing a system to measure the outcome of their services and increasing stakeholder involvement throughout Homefirst, including enhancement of volunteer opportunities.

"We are very excited about moving forward with these priorities to ensure the growth of Homefirst into the future and to increase and improve our service to those in need," Casey said.

Casey, a trial lawyer and partner with a firm in Scotch Plains, resides in Westfield with his wife, Priscilla, and his two-year-old son, Calvin. He has served

on the Board of Trustees for three years, most recently as President, but his involvement with Homefirst dates back much earlier than that.

"I have been with Homefirst since I was in high school, twenty years ago. I volunteered with what was then the Interfaith Council for the Homeless by stuffing envelopes for fundraising," Casey said. He would later become a volunteer for the Interfaith Hospitality Network shelter program at his church, Grace Episcopal in Plainfield. Eventually he would become the congregation's volunteer coordinator for that program.

In addition to his work with Homefirst, Woodruff has made contributions to the

community in other capacities. He is the former Executive Director of El Centro Hispanoamericano of Plainfield, a non-profit assisting low-income members of the Hispanic community with legal services, education and social services. He also recently served on the board of Visiting Health Services of Union County, a nonprofit home health care agency for low income home-bound individuals.

With such extensive and varied backgrounds in community service, Casey and Ellen are clearly well armed for the challenges 2009 is sure to bring. They look forward to tackling those issues head-on and to making a meaningful difference in the lives of many local families.

Homefirst is fortunate to have a group of educated and dedicated employees to implement the mission of the organization on a daily basis. Highlighted below are the latest members to join the Homefirst Staff.



Bethany Griggs
Case Manager of Supportive Housing

When she worked a summer job at a mortgage company during college, Bethany Griggs realized rush hour traffic and cubicles were not for her. After working with survivors of domestic abuse as the Senior Shelter Advocate at the YWCA of Eastern Union County for two years, she joined Homefirst as the Case Manager of Supportive Housing in September 2008.

"I knew I wanted a career in the non-profit sector, working toward social justice," Bethany said.

Supportive Housing is a housing program for homeless people who are living with a physical or mental disability. Bethany's case management is focused on Supportive Housing tenants with children. She prepares arts and crafts projects for the children in the program and visits families regularly to help with homework and discuss themes like nutrition and wellness.

"Everyone already has had many 'case managers' like me come in, and go out, of their lives. I try to always keep in mind how I would feel if I were in their position, listening to me tell them what I think is best for them."

Bethany graduated from Douglass College, Rutgers University in 2005 with a degree in Women's and Gender Studies.



Rick Porter
Deputy Director of Development

Service has always been important to Rick Porter. He became part of Homefirst's staff in 2007 as Deputy Director of Development, but working for Homefirst is only one of the ways he serves others. A member of the

Maplewood Rotary Club for nine years, he is currently the Co-chair of the district's Gift of Life Committee.

"It's just in my nature to help other people and to inspire people to help others," Rick said, "When I came to Homefirst, I was impressed with the staff's dedication to the organization's mission."

Before joining Homefirst, Rick applied his degrees in economics and mathematics in a banking career, first in his native Canada, and then internationally. He left the banking industry in 2000 to pursue an event planning business. His interest in event planning led him to the non-profit sector, and eventually, to Homefirst.

"I bring my experience as a 'people manager' and my skill in developing relationships with business counterparts to my job at Homefirst. To be able to connect with the mission of an organization you have to be able to work with all kinds of people."



Julio Ruiz
Van Driver

Julio Ruiz often begins his day at Homefirst around five a.m. As van driver, it is his job to pick up shelter guests from area congregations and bring their children to and from school. He is invaluable to the families who need a ride to a doctor's appointment, work, or job training.

A resident of Plainfield, Julio was a school bus driver in Iselin, Piscataway, and Plainfield before joining Homefirst in March 2008, and he prefers the calm of driving for Homefirst to the noise of a busload of children.

"I don't have a favorite part of my job; everything about it is perfect to me. It's close to home, it allows me to support my family, and help families out with a ride and a smile- I let the families

know that they are not alone and we are all here to make their day brighter," said Julio.



Kathy Higgins
Director of Finance

Kathy Higgins brought with her an exceptional amount of experience when she joined Homefirst in August 2008 as Director of Finance. "I passed the NJ CPA (Certified Public Accountant) exam back in 1985 and have been working in finance and accounting ever since then," Kathy said.

After several long-term corporate finance jobs at Ingersoll Rand and Engelhard Corporation, Kathy left the corporate environment for a job at an educational services company. She worked with math educators who serve New Jersey's Abbott school districts to improve math proficiency. "We made a significant impact on the test results of students in these districts. After leaving the company, I decided to stay in a small, helping environment. Homefirst was a good choice."

Kathy describes her typical day as Finance Director as "busy." In Homefirst's "helping environment," she is not only responsible for simple tasks like paying bills and processing payroll, but also for more complex tasks like reviewing operating budgets, monitoring vouchering for grants, and managing overall cash flow.

**As of last January
approximately
1600 homeless
individuals were
living in Union County.**

Spotlight on Board Members

The Homefirst Board is comprised of volunteers dedicated to the mission and vision of Homefirst. The following new board members were voted in, in January 2009.



Board member
Richard Szeto

New board member Richard Szeto spent most of his career in technology strategy work on Wall Street. It was a job he was good at, but a grind that eventually wore him down.

"I really, truly wanted to do something outside of Wall Street," said Richard, a husband and father of three who lives in Fanwood. So three years ago he left Wall Street to start his own consulting business — and get more involved with community service.

"I really wanted to spend my new career doing work for the public sector," he said. "It was important for me to get into volunteering again."

Richard's six-month stint on Homefirst's finance subcommittee eventually led to a full-time year long position as project director for the collaborative effort of Homefirst, Rutgers University and the Plainfield Organization for West End Revitalization (POWER). The project involved creating a blueprint of revitalization of the Plainfield West End neighborhood using a Wachovia Regional Foundation grant.

"It was an unbelievable experience for me," Szeto said. "Understanding community organizations and mission-oriented objectives was just a fascinating personal experience."

When that job was finished, he returned to Homefirst, serving as a volunteer on the housing subcommittee for more than a year before expressing an interest in joining the board.

"I'm still on the housing subcommittee," said Richard, where he and his committee members are challenged to set policy on housing. "But now I look at policy across the board, whether in human resources or the financial side. It's a broad breadth of policy oversight that I'm involved in."

Richard says his background in both fiscal matters and operational oversight will come in handy for his new role as a board member.

"Dollars are so short these days for the public sector, I can add a point of view that's very cost-conscious but effective," he said. "Here's an organization that is working hard to raise funds and use those funds in a fiscally responsible way to implement their core mission."

— Robyn Passante



Board member
Ellen Catlin

Joining the Homefirst board in January 2009, Ellen Catlin is eager to start helping the organization make a difference. "In order to break the cycle of poverty, families need food, medical care, and housing that is safe, stable and affordable. Homefirst provides one of these essential needs. And by helping families, Homefirst helps the communities in which we live."

A resident of Garwood, Ellen served as Treasurer of the Watchung Sail & Power Squadron for six years. Born in Brooklyn, she grew up on the south shore of Long Island and graduated from Davis & Elkins College in Elkins, WV. After graduate work at New York University and Fairleigh Dickinson University she would enter a career in systems and finance. Years later, it was a professional connection that would lead her to Homefirst.

First meeting her at work, Ellen has been friends with Judy Musicant for more than 25 years. Now a Homefirst board member and chairperson of the Human Resources Committee, Judy invited Ellen to one of the organization's introductory breakfasts a couple of years ago. The agency's work impressed her, and later, when Judy suggested she get involved, the timing felt right.

"Judy is a great person and I've always held her in high esteem," Ellen said. "So when she told me she thought I could be helpful on the Homefirst board, I felt it was time to give back." Also now serving on the Homefirst

Human Resources Committee, Ellen is enthusiastic to be part of an organization that she says "goes about its mission with such zeal."

— Kim Lionetti



Board member
Michael Simmons

Michael Simmons believed in Homefirst's mission so strongly that he got his kids involved with the organization's shelter program through the family's church, Grace Episcopal Church.

"I really believe in what the mission is, in terms of helping others help themselves," said Michael, one of three new Homefirst board members.

Four years ago Michael joined Homefirst's human resources committee to give even more of his time to the organization. There he helped do everything from rewriting the group's policy manual to assisting with the search for the new executive director.

But between his full-time job and being an active parent to his three kids, he had to turn down Homefirst's repeated requests for him to join the organization's board of trustees.

That is, until last fall, when he found himself between jobs and finally able to take on a larger role with Homefirst.

"(Being out of work) has let me get more involved here," Michael said.

Michael, 47, has been a human resources professional for 16 years, and he brings that expertise to his new role on the board. He already has helped with various human resource needs for Homefirst's employees, and will continue to do so.

Michael and his wife Denise live in Plainfield and have been married for nearly 20 years. They have three children, ages 15, 13 and 8.

— Robyn Passante

The Presbyterian Church in Westfield Takes Their Commitment Beyond the Shelter

The Presbyterian Church in Westfield has been with Homefirst since its humble but ambitious beginnings in 1986.

And as the organization's mission has grown over the years, so, too, has the church's efforts to make that mission a success.

Westfield Presbyterian member Alice Ousterman remembers the start of what was then called the Interfaith Council for the Homeless of Union County. She read about the new shelter program in her church bulletin and thought it was the right time for her to get involved.

"I was just retiring from teaching and wanted to do something that was worthwhile," Alice said. "It really struck a chord with me and I decided to see what it was all about."

Alice quickly became the assistant to the church member who was heading up the congregation's participation in the shelter program. When that person stepped down, Ousterman took the lead — and has held it for more than 20 years.

"The more I got into it, the more it just didn't seem that hard to do," she said. "It was always interesting. Every group of people was different, just as you have in teaching."

She and her fellow church members helped countless families over the years, hosting up to 14 homeless people for one full week, four times a year.

One of the volunteers that makes hosting possible is Marybeth Lapham. Lapham, who is Alice's fellow church member at Westfield Presbyterian, has been working to make sure everyone — and she means everyone — knows about Homefirst, and what it is doing for the area's needy families.

Though she'd heard of Homefirst through her church's involvement with the shelter network, she and many others didn't realize the full scope of the organization's mission.

"The Interfaith Hospitality Network was all most of us knew Homefirst was — We didn't realize there was this whole other piece of what Homefirst was about."

That is, until Marybeth went to a

Homefirst Faith, Home and Charity Breakfast in the fall of 2007, and her eyes were opened to all that the organization is doing to house, help and empower those in need.

She was so impressed that she took her knowledge and excitement back to the church's Presbyterian Women's Group and to her own Circle One group, a small subset of the Presbyterian Women's Group that is comprised of 25 church women who gather for Bible study, fellowship and philanthropy. They had been looking for a mission, and now they had one: Spread the word about Homefirst and all that it is doing to help those in need in their community.

"The goal for us is raising awareness of homelessness in our area," Lapham said.

They started by introducing Susan Oldroyd Laffler and Rick Porter, of Homefirst, to their church's Men's Breakfast group, Mission Commission, Senior Group and Youth Groups. They also began hosting monthly get-togethers in members' homes, to which outsiders are invited, along with someone from Homefirst who speaks to those gathered about the organization's efforts and needs.

In December the group expanded its efforts to include a little free home decorating service for those moving into Homefirst Transitional Housing. They brought decorative items, cleaning supplies and other goods to a woman's new apartment just before the holidays and, in one inspiring afternoon, helped to make her house a home.

"It was really exciting," Marybeth said of the initiative, which garnered an overwhelming response from Circle One members donating goods.

Lapham's Homefirst connection came full circle when the congregation decided to host a breakfast much like the one that first inspired her to get



Goods collected from the Presbyterian Church in Westfield "Welcome Home" Basket drive.

involved. The goal of the breakfast was to raise awareness and, hopefully, need funds for the mission. In fact more than 70 adults and 60 youth attended the March 2009 event. In addition to raising awareness the event raised more than \$20,000 for Homefirst.

"We never really thought we would have such an impact on being able to change homelessness in a major way in our local community," Lapham said of her small group. "Our initial thought was that we could raise awareness about homelessness — and then people started truly wanting to help in a meaningful way."

Jane Collins had a similar goal in mind when she and her own women's group decided to organize a fundraising cocktail party at the home of Lisa and Tom Walker. With close to fifty church members in attendance and even more offering donations, the event was an unmitigated success, raising over \$6000. Homefirst Director of Development and Public Relations, Susan Laffler, provided a presentation on the agency's community programs and later, attendees were treated to some live music by a band comprised of a few of their fellow congregants.

"The Presbyterian Church in Westfield has been involved with Homefirst for many years through the shelter program. We wanted to raise money and raise awareness about all of the great work the organization is doing. It's not just a shelter program anymore," Collins said.

The Faith League of Homefirst is a group of individuals and Congregations who donate more than \$1,000 per year for five years.

Devoted to community involvement, James Ooi and Amy Yin were attracted to the Homefirst philosophy of improving neighborhoods from the inside out. "Homefirst has a compelling mission of tackling homelessness as a key cause in the continuation of the cycle of poverty," James said. "Their approach to solving homelessness in a permanent way, one family at a time, made sense. We felt we were really investing in alleviating homelessness long term, rather than just temporarily."

The couple first learned about the organization through their close friend, Mary Robinson, who just happened to be the organization's director of external affairs at that time. The staff's passion for the cause was contagious, and James and Amy felt energized with the opportunity to make a large impact on a relatively small organization. The level of

commitment they've contributed make them members of Homefirst's deeply valued Faith League.

James Ooi is a managing director of proprietary trading at Credit Suisse, where he's worked for the past ten years. He also spent several years as a math teacher at Columbia High School in Maplewood and serves as a Homefirst board member.

His wife, Amy Yin, previously a director at Prudential Insurance Company, runs Amy Yin Interiors, LLC, specializing in residential design. She has served on the board and is a founder of Good Grief; she has also been on the board of Rainbows, Inc., Amy first became involved with Homefirst by using her design talents to re-decorate Homefirst's Shelter Day Room, then later served on the organization's re-naming committee.

"It is through the genuine care and

To find out more about how to contribute and become a member of the Homefirst Faith League please contact Susan Oldroyd Laffler, Director of Development (908) 753-4001 x 20.

concern for the clients we serve and the deep financial commitment of Faith League Donors like James and Amy that make our important work possible" said Ellen McGovern, Executive Director of Homefirst.

Homefirst Welcomes Two Local Congregations to Interfaith Hospitality Network *By Michelle Conway*

First Unitarian Society of Plainfield

The First Unitarian Society of Plainfield first became involved with the Interfaith Hospitality Network over 18 years ago, as a part of the congregation's commitment to service. When its shelter space flooded five years ago, dangerous mold left the congregation with no choice but to throw away its beds and close its doors to shelter guests.

With the help of Fred Lange, president of the Society and Karen Hawkins and Melissa Logan, IHN coordinators, Plainfield Unitarian renewed hosting guests from Homefirst's long-running shelter program in March 2009. Mr. Lange is happy to say, rather than hosting guests in the basement as before, his congregation hosted guests on more welcoming upper floors with windows.

"Once I saw a former shelter guest at Staples who recognized me from the shelter program and said 'You really helped me. Now I'm a supervisor at Staples, supporting myself, and doing well! It's wonderful to see what the congregation's effort can amount to,'" said Mr. Lange.

Saint Bartholomew The Apostle Church of Scotch Plains

Homefirst is pleased to welcome a new congregation into its shelter program, Interfaith Hospitality Network (IHN). St. Bartholomew The Apostle Church will begin hosting shelter guests in July.

Thanks to the efforts of Susan D'Apuzzo, Elaine Coupe, and Fr. John J. Paladino, St. Bart's joins the IHN after serving two years as a support congregation to United Presbyterian Church in Plainfield. In addition to the church now serving as a host congregation, the parish's eighth grade confirmation class hosted a holiday party for 80 Homefirst guests in December 2008. Volunteers provided entertainment, holiday treats, gifts and crafts at the event.

Homefirst appreciates the generosity and service of the church and its students and looks forward to working with them as they become more involved with the agency's housing programs.

Homefirst's Wish List:

Volunteers:

Homefirst is seeking volunteers for the following activities and projects

Development and

Public Relations Assistant:

Flexible hours to assist with written communications, event planning and grant writing as well as light office work

Writers:

Flexible hours to assist with grant applications, newsletters and website editing

Fundraising Breakfast

Table Captains:

Host a table of 10 at Homefirst's annual fundraising breakfast in November.

Office Help:

Assist the Homefirst team with light office work such as inventorying and ordering supplies, photocopying, and phone calls. Make your own hours.

Group Event Coordinators:

Plan and organize special events for the clients of Homefirst (e.g. Dance Party; Holiday Party; etc.)

Nutritional Food Collection

(group project):

Collect and distribute wholesome foods for families living in poverty.

All volunteer projects will be supervised by Amy Van Pelt the Director of Volunteer Programs.

Donations:

The following donations are being sought for our youngest clients:

- Diapers (all sizes) for the babies in our emergency shelter
- Disposable cameras for a youth art project
- Sketch pads and journals for art and writing programs
- Digital camera

Please contact Amy Van Pelt before making a supplies donation: 908-753-4001 ex. 12



Central Jersey Hampton Alumni Association Inc. annual school supply drive.



Taura's Story

To view the latest Homefirst video "Taura's Story" please log onto www.homefirstinc.org and click on the video icon on the homepage.

Questions and Answers for the Interfaith Hospitality Network

Q Recently, while volunteering at my congregation, a guest confided a very personal matter to me. How should I handle this type of situation? Is it okay to offer advice to guests on their personal issues?

A While we often feel moved to offer any assistance we can to the guests we are serving, it's important to refrain from advising them on their personal issues. Janice, the Homefirst IHN Coordinator, meets with each family on a regular basis to counsel them and connect them with needed services. Volunteers should always listen but never ask questions and never give advice. If a guest asks you for your advice, please encourage them to speak with Janice and ensure them that she can help them seek the answers they need.

Q I love volunteering in my congregation during our hosting weeks. I am a school teacher and love to interact with the children during and after dinner time. What other opportunities are there to volunteer with the children you serve?

A While it is true that most of our volunteers (more than 1,000, in fact!) are those like yourself who volunteer when their congregation is hosting homeless families, there are plenty of other short and long-term volunteer activities for individuals and groups that might be just what you are looking for. Our Volunteer Services Department not only works within the Interfaith Hospitality Network but also helps individuals and groups to create meaningful volunteer experiences that meet the needs of the families we serve. If you have the time to contribute, we would love to link you to a Homefirst volunteer opportunity. For more information, contact Amy at 908-753-4001, ext. 12 or amy@homefirstinc.org.



House Tours

Next Scheduled Dates:

May 29

June 26

July 31

August 28

All tours start at 9:00 a.m. at our home office and last approximately one hour.

This is an excellent opportunity to learn more about Homefirst's mission and see first hand the day to day impact we are having on the community we serve.

Over coffee with our Executive Director and Board Host, we'll give you facts and figures and answer your questions. Meet and hear directly from one of our clients whose life was completely turned around with our support and

commitment. Tour one of our recently renovated homes that will soon be occupied by eligible families.

Make your reservation today by calling, or sending an e-mail to:

Rick Porter

(908) 753-4001, ext 24
rick@homefirstinc.org

Our office is located at: 905 Watchung Avenue, Plainfield 07060 (we are at the corner of Franklin Place and Watchung Avenue)

Contributors

All articles in this newsletter were contributed by guest volunteer writers. Homefirst would like to thank these contributors for giving their time and skill to make this publication possible.

Kim Lionetti, formerly a senior editor with Penguin Group USA, is a literary agent living in Scotch Plains, NJ. She's also a member of Faith Lutheran Church in New Providence, a host congregation in the Interfaith Hospitality Network.

Michelle Conway volunteers in the Development and Public Relations Department at Homefirst. She is a senior at Scotch Plains-Fanwood High School, where she is the editor of her school newspaper, and will be attending Columbia University in the fall.

Robyn Passante is a freelance journalist and editor in Harrisburg, PA.

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