

Our Father's House gives family hope for a brighter future

By Anne O'Connor, Special to the Sentinel & Enterprise

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FITCHBURG -- A year ago, Charlene Fuentes never dreamed she would be in school, much less a member of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, the most prestigious academic honors society in the nation.

In December 2017, the mother of two had a more basic goal: to keep her family together.

Fuentes left her home after seven years when the landlord needed the apartment for a family member. Suddenly, the Fuentes were on the street, evicted.

The determined mother researched her options in advance. Still, "the shock was not knowing where we were going, what to expect," she said.

Fuentes went to the Division of Transitional Assistance in Lawrence the morning she lost her home.

That afternoon, the three-member family was placed in Transitions at Devens, an Emergency Assistance family shelter where they had their own apartment.

At Transitions, a family homeless shelter of Our Father's House, Fuentes found the support she needed to get her life on track. She put the resources provided at the shelter to work.

"It helps if people are on top of you," she said.

Transitions provides case workers from the Montachusett Opportunity Council and employs a part-time children's social worker, a position partially funded by a grant through the Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts. They work with the 20 families in Transitions to remove the barriers to rehousing.

With help from her team, Fuentes arranged to transport her high-school-age children to school in Lawrence and looked for an apartment and kept a budget.

In addition to repairing her credit, Fuentes needed to improve her income. She had worked at office jobs in the past, but a physical disability means now she cannot sit or stand for long periods of time.

She and the social worker identified a position that has the flexibility demanded by Fuentes' disability and filled an important need for the career-seeker.

"I like to help others," Fuentes said, and made plans to become an interpreter for the deaf.

There were lots of moving parts and things moved quickly for the family after they were in shelter.

At the end of May, with monetary assistance from HomeBASE, a re-housing benefit for residents in emergency assistance shelter, the family moved to an apartment in Fitchburg.

In June, Anthony, now 19, graduated from high school and went to work as a meat packer at Blood Farm, a slaughterhouse in Groton. Now he contributes to the household and has money of his own. He has spoken to his boss about learning to become a butcher.

Charlene began a program at Quinsigamond Community College in September. Her studies are funded by a Pell grant, assistance from Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission and, of course, student loans.

Precious, now 16, lives with her father and will return to her mother's home this spring. The plan is for her to finish her senior year at Fitchburg High School.

The reunification makes her mother happy. "It's always good to have your kids with you," Charlene said.

The family is poised to strike out on their own. Case managers bow out after the family has been in stable housing for 12 months. HomeBASE assistance ends at the same time.

Fuentes is ready. She will have her children with her and be halfway through her associate degree, and has enough income to pay the rent. She hopes to purchase a house within five years.

Fuentes beamed with joy as she said, "I'm at peace. My stress level is zero."

Anne O'Connor is the transitions manager at Our Father's House family shelter in Devens and a former staff writer for the Sentinel & Enterprise.

How to help Our Father's House

"1964 The Tribute," called by Rolling Stone "the Best Beatles Tribute on Earth," returns for a show at Fitchburg State University's Weston Auditorium at 8 p.m. on Saturday, April 13.

All net proceeds benefit Our Father's House, established in 1983. OFH provides shelter for homeless men, women and families, transitional housing for women, sober living for men, a food pantry and, throughout the Montachusett region, street outreach improving the lives of the unsheltered homeless.

Tickets for assigned seats are \$30 and available through Our Father's House. For ordering information, call Ginnie at 978-345-2256 ext. 300.