Community Housing Network seeks gift donors for the needy

Thursday, December 1, 2016

Rachel Willis remembers the tears of gratitude that came last Christmas morning when she pulled back the beautiful paper and realized she now had a coffee pot.

“It blessed me the most to just have things people might take for granted. Those are the things that meant the most for our family,” she says of being a part of Community Housing Network’s Adopt A Family program. The coffee pot was a promise that she would be able to offer coffee to her aunt or sister when they came to visit.

“I don’t know what we would have done without the program,” she says.

Each year, Adopt A Family donors shop from wish lists put together by the participants in Community Housing Network (CHN) programs, spending no more than $100 for each person adopted. The gifts are wrapped and tagged and dropped off at one of CHN’s locations for distribution. Many of those in the programs were recently homeless and basic necessities fill the wish list.

Willis also received a microwave last year and her husband, James, who loves to cook, was thrilled with his deep fryer. Another fulfilled request from their wish list was for a gas card. “We thanked God for that,” she says, “because that eased a bit of our financial burden getting the kids to school and him to work.” Their four children all received toys, but Willis was most grateful that the donors all provided for winter coats and boots.

“The cherry on the top was to be able to have a Christmas!”

The Adopt A Family program “made a difference in our kids’ lives and our family life” and she says helped make their new house a home.

Having a home is something Willis says she will never take for granted.

She remembers well her first home in a motel with rats and cockroaches “that would come out of the cereal boxes at breakfast.” Then there was a stretch of living in abandoned homes with “boards covering all of the windows and doors that would not lock.” She was removed from her parents and adopted out of foster care when she was 11.

Willis considers herself fortunate that she was able to find work at an assisted living home while still in high school and saved enough money to buy a car. She remembers that when her mother died, her father kicked her out of the house. “I didn’t know anything about shelters, so I would go to work and try to hide my car parking in back of the building where I worked and slept for the night.” She says she risked her job and would sneak into the home early in the morning to wash up for school. Her 1997 Grand Am was her home, her transportation and the place where she studied for the last part of her junior year and throughout her senior year, graduating from Waterford Mott in 2005. She never broadcast that she was homeless but figures a few teachers may have suspected something.
Meeting James, who she calls “my savior,” changed her life. He and his mother welcomed her into their home and their friendship deepened.

The couple, now with four children, are “definitely trying to scrape and climb our way back to medium,” she says. “Who cares about the top? We want a roof over our heads and a warm bed for our kids. We are grateful every day.”

She says it is “the grace of God” that lead her to CHN and into housing for her family, still struggling because she is unable to work now due to a disability but is grateful her husband recently found work again as a laborer. “Without CHN, I don’t think there would be hope for us. We have been blessed more than I could ever say.”

Adopt A Family

More than 200 wish lists are still available for individuals, corporations or organizations to be involved with this year’s Adopt A Family program.

To receive a wish list, contact Tami Jelinek at TJelinek@chninc.net or 248-824-7316. Once you have a wish list, shop for the items, wrap and label and drop them off by Friday, Dec. 9.

For more information, visit www.communityhousingnetwork.org/adoptafamily.

– Edited by Julie Jacobson Hines, The Oakland Press


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