

A mission to help single mothers

Wantagh group gives moms all the tools

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“You see, growing up in a West Indian household, they taught me everything but to be independent,” 23-year-old Sarahlee Rolle said. “I didn’t know who I was or what I really wanted out of life. I was told who I was supposed to be.”

For Rolle, and many young mothers like her, supporting a child while also finding independence can be nearly impossible. With no education, no source of income and four months pregnant, Rolle found herself at the front door of Mommas House in Wantagh, a mother-child haven and, in Rolle’s case, a blessing in disguise.



“Prior to coming here, I was an illegal resident in the United States for over six years,” she said. “My family bashed me out after I left pregnant at 20, and even though I still visited them, the love wasn’t there. I found Mommas House through the Sisters of Life at a Catholic church, and I moved in the following week.”

Established in 1986, Mommas House, a nonprofit organization that helps relocate young mothers in need, came to Wantagh with the help of many volunteers. Three years later, the program obtained housing in an abandoned building, owned by the parish of Our Lady of Lourdes in Malverne. After renovating the building, Mommas House brought in four families.

“There was a need, and we saw this need,” Director Patricia Shea said. “We found that these young women were having a terrible time in being able to keep these babies and find the right resources.”

News of the renovated house spread, and with it came many more mothers looking for help. Three more group child-mother residencies sprung up, in Hempstead, Glen Cove and Jericho, as well as transitional apartments in East Massapequa.

“It wasn’t easy moving far away from my family,” said Rolle, a Queens native. “Coming here, I didn’t know what to expect, but I met three other pregnant girls and another mother of two. They were all working toward productive goals by either going to school or working, or both.”

Mommas House is funded by government grants, personal donations and charitable events. Every year, members host a gala to raise money. The most recent one was held in Eisenhower Park in November.

Helping mothers everywhere

Although Mommas House focuses primarily on homelessness, it also offers day care, parenting, education, employment and mental health programs, and the mothers get help from social workers. “We advocate for the mothers and their children,” social worker Ashley Loodus said. “We assist them with benefits and make sure they have things like health insurance or public assistance.”

With one “house mother” in each home overseeing chores and responsibilities, and Loodus and another social worker, Daniela Richards, only a phone call away, the mothers slowly grasp the concept of motherhood and how to be self-sufficient.

“We also help them register for WIC,” Richards said, referring to the food supplement program for women, infants and children that helps them to eat healthy. “We also provide mental health counseling, which is imperative. Many of these mothers are not in a good situation, and live in homeless shelters or on the streets. Counseling helps address underlying issues.”

As the mothers start to earn money, they are slowly weaned off public assistance and can begin the journey to independence. With the addition of schooling and a driver’s license, they can finally move out and start lives of their own.

“I learned a few tricks on motherhood,” Rolle said. “It’s not easy being a single mom. I know you hear it all the time, but there are nights or mornings I wake up in tears, wondering, how am I going to pull this off? You have to make sacrifices, like should I buy lunch out of work or just settle for nursing home food?”

“The good thing about Mommas House,” she continued, “is that if you fail, they’re there to help you, motivate you and make you think outside the box.”

With its mission of guiding and directing young mothers, the small nonprofit in Wantagh has grown to be one of the largest organizations helping mothers in need everywhere. For Mommas House, where there’s a will, there’s a way. “If you ever get overworked, frustrated or unmotivated, you focus on the present,” Rolle said. “Where am I? Here. What time is it? Now. You have to plan ahead, but remember to live in the present, because tomorrow is never promised.”

For more information on Mommas House, visit www.mommashouse.org.

