

## Helping young mothers cope Malverne Mommas House provides support system

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By Sarah Moskowitz

Shania is one of the children being raised at Mommas House, an organization that is dedicated to sheltering and guiding teenage mothers through the tough first steps in parenting and caring for their babies.

Pat Shea, the director of Mommas House, was familiar with the needs and concerns of pregnant teenagers when she began the organization in 1986 in a house in Wantagh. While working as a teen pregnancy counselor at Birthright of Nassau/Suffolk, Shea sheltered women in her own home for 10 years.

"I realized that they needed a lot more than just a roof over their heads," said Shea. "They needed a program, so we developed one."

Mommas House is not just a home for young mothers, but a learning experience and a training program as well. Mothers age 17 to 21 may be admitted into Mommas House until they get onto their feet. During their stay they are required to pursue an education that will lead into a stable profession. The average stay of a mother at Mommas House is two and a half years.

The Malverne Mommas House was provided by Our Lady of Lourdes Church in 1989 and shares the same property as the church and its school. It is, as the name suggests, not a facility, center, or institution of any kind, but a warm, cozy, inviting place to stay.

The Malverne house provides space for four women and their children. In each of the Mommas House locations -- they also exist in Brookville and Glen Cove -- one of the rooms is large enough for a mother with two children, or for one who is expecting. Women may also take advantage of the program during pregnancy and are required to pay rent during their stay, usually with help from government assistance programs.

The women in the program come from Long Island, other parts of New York and even outside of the state. Currently there is one woman from Oklahoma living at the Brookville house. Doctors, lawyers, hospitals, churches, schools, social services and many other organizations that work closely with teen mothers often refer women to Mommas House.

Shea described the three main goals at Mommas House as a way to ultimately see the young women succeed. The first goal is to keep everyone in a safe environment so that child abuse can be prevented. The second goal is to educate the mothers and assist in their maturation.

"We're providing these mothers with an environment where responsibilities are stressed and support is available," said Shea.

The third goal is to guide the women towards their dreams.

Mommas House is primarily run by volunteers and donations. In addition to weekly visits by a certified psychologist, women in the program receive parenting classes and learn to balance



their checkbooks and manage their finances, relate to their children and the fathers and collect child support.

Recently Mommas House was granted \$3,500 from the Long Island Fund for Women and

Girls (LIFWG) to provide funding for a social worker. The social worker's job is to increase the role of the fathers of children in the program and establish a child support system, both emotionally and financially.

"They do great work," said Diane Cohen, executive director of LIFWG, of why Mommas House was selected for the grant. "We're all for increasing the father's responsibility, which will increase the well-being of the child as well. [It's important] to have adequate financial support."

In essence, the women are a family, and are responsible for doing chores around the home, including cleaning and cooking. House managers see to it that the young mothers keep to a chore schedule and that their babies are looked after at all times. In many cases, it is the closest they have come to having a stable family.

Most of the women come from distressed backgrounds. Many had dysfunctional families or lived in foster homes or group residences. Almost all are homeless, or close to it, said Shea.

But history does not hinder the women's determination to progress towards a better, more stable life. Shea recalled one particular success story, when a 17-year-old approached Mommas House. The woman was a student at Malverne High School and during her stay at Mommas House had a baby and became the first to graduate high school in her family. She went on to, with the help of Mommas House, attend the State University of New York at Albany and now, at 25 years old, is a social worker living independently in Albany.

"We've had really good rewarding situations where young women can really turn their lives around and overcome obstacles that are really quite hard," said Shea.

Staying at the Malverne house for the moment is Mahogany, a 23-year-old who came to Mommas House five months pregnant and living in a car.

"She was really desperate," recalled Shea, "but seemed to have a lot of potential."

Because of her dire straits, Mahogany was accepted into the house that same day. Mahogany said that she has received life advice from the supervisors to begin planning her future, but that their guidance and suggestions only go so far.

"You make your own decisions," said Mahogany. "You live your own life."

Mahogany became a mother last month to Mikhaella and is planning on going to trade school. Unfortunately, not all applicants are so lucky. The wait list to enter Mommas House is long, with over two dozen women on it. But Shea said exceptions could always be made.

"If they can't last where they are, it's useless to even have a waiting list," said Shea. "If I see a severe emergency with someone, and if they have the right state of mind...I might take them in."