

MOMMAS HOUSE has hope that help will come

By Nancy Dwyer

The future is shaky for Birthright's temporary residence for teen-age mothers and their babies.

A small but solid core of people are determined to keep the house going till enough support rallies to make survival certain.

Long Island has emergency shelters and temporary residences for recovering alcoholics, ex-convicts, troubled adolescents, burned-out or evicted families, battered women, pregnant teens. All are needed and all are struggling, in some cases just hanging on by a shoestring.

But if they're hanging by a shoestring, MOMMAS hangs by a hair.

A group of ten people, with perhaps eight or more assisting, are quite certain that a place like MOMMAS is also needed.

They know that teen-age girls just beginning to be mothers to newborn babies need a lot of support — not just financial, but also emotional and practical.

Girls who can't, for one reason or another, get that support from their families often fall into tragic lifestyles — dependence on welfare; housing in horrifying conditions where both the filth and the covenants menace the girl and her baby; and, for some, reliance on drugs and alcohol or on sweet talk from some man to ease their anguish.

What this does to the girl is bad enough. But the cycle of an unhealthy lifestyle it sets in motion for her baby will carry heavy costs in the years ahead — human costs in the development of the child, dollars-and-cents costs to society which will be dealing with that damage for many decades to come.

Pat Shea, director, can't explain why support hasn't rallied for MOMMAS in the year it's been operating.

"Maybe we haven't gotten the word out well enough," she suggests.

Most of MOMMAS' on-going support continues to come from Birthright, but how much longer, she asks herself, can the house continue to siphon money away from the very essential programs for women with problem pregnancies.

There is some support — a couple of small grants, including \$1,500 from the diocesan Human Development office; and assistance from the Long Island Food Bank, the St. Vincent de Paul Society, and some surrounding parishes — St. William the Abbot, Seaford, Pat's home parish; St. Barnabas, Bellmore; St. Frances de Chantal, Wantagh; St. Martin of Tours, Bethpage.

These resources have provided food, baby clothes, occasional items like baby carriages, and some money.

"But it costs almost \$3,000 a month to run this place," Pat points out.

And even beyond day-to-day maintenance of the house, there's a need for additional funds to get these girls on the road to self-sufficiency.

For instance, Briarcliff has scholarships the girls could use for business education. "That's a real gift," says Pat. "But to take advantage of that, they'd need day care for their babies, transportation, and decent clothing — skirts, dresses, heels, stockings.

"It's frustrating if a girl can't take advantage of that opportunity." Employment in a fast-food eatery, Pat knows, won't get a girl enough money to maintain herself and her baby and pay her rent.

VOLUNTEERS A CRITICAL NEED

But perhaps even more critical than financial support is volunteer support.

"People are willing to give us their prayers," says Barbara Harrison, of the core group for the house, "and we do appreciate that tremendously. This house was built on prayer."

But problems crop up in getting volunteers.

"Sometimes people have a judgmental attitude towards the girls," says Barbara.

"Some feel that the girl should give the baby up for adoption," Pat explains. "But that's the mother's decision, and she has to live with that. And that's not always so great an option. Some of these girls have had had experiences themselves in foster care or adoption and don't want that for their baby.

"And for some girls, this baby is the only blood family they've ever known."

Some people want to volunteer but have their own agendas, determined to evangelize the girls to their style of religion. "But it's example that leads," Pat points out, "not pressure."

And some potential volunteers simply seem intimidated by the idea. "But it's a very simple thing," says Barbara, "to come here and get to know our girls. You don't have to give a great deal of time."

It's important, Pat adds, that volunteers come without any strings attached, without wanting to fulfill their own needs but to help the girls and their babies. "They should be giving and motherly or fatherly in their approach to the girls."

Pat, having worked for 17 years in Birthright, is aware of the criticisms leveled against those Working in the right-to-life movement. "People say, 'All they care about is to get that baby born; they don't care afterwards.'

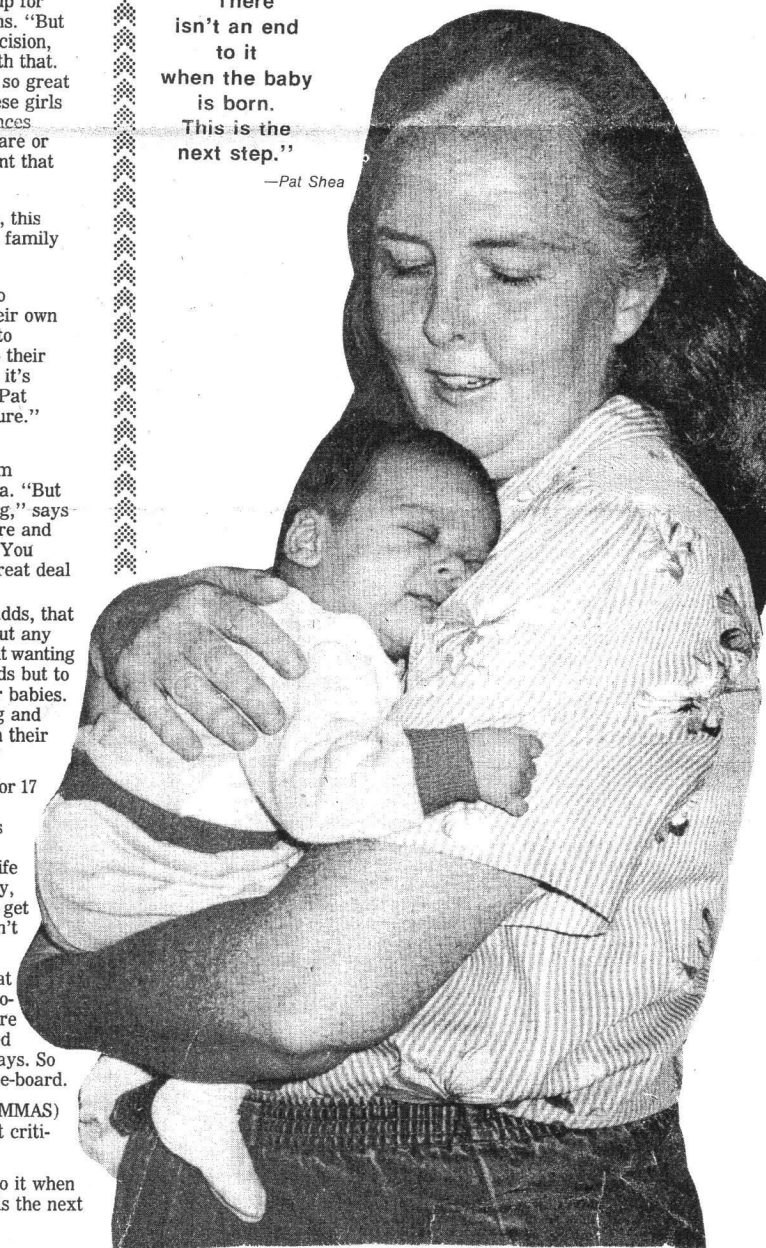
"That's not true," Pat says. "I know a lot of people in right-to-life who are helping the handicapped and serving in other ways. So that's not true across-the-board.

"But this (helping MOMMAS) is one way to allay that criticism.

"There isn't an end to it when the baby is born. This is the next step."

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—Pat Shea



Volunteers come in all ages

Judy Curran had her seventh grade CCD class at St. William the Abbot, as part of their confirmation project, clean out the coal bin at MOMMAS — definitely a dirty job but somebody had to do it.

MOMMAS wants to use the basement for emergency housing.

The day began with Mass and breakfast and questions as to how this was going to work in the rain.

But the rain was heaven-sent. It was a mess, Judy recalls, but the rain damped down the coal dust that might have been raised throughout the house.

The youngsters made a chain, loaded the coal into buckets, then passed the buckets from one to another up the stairs, out the back door, and into a wheelbarrow to be dumped into a pile for pick-up.

The students also sorted clothing that had been donated and had a chance to talk with the girls.

The youngsters were elated by the day, especially because "they never think they can do much," says Judy. But this was a valuable contribution — valuable on both sides.

MOMMAS had the needed work done. The students got a worthwhile experience.

Pat Shea speaks to the students every year about Birthright. This experience, says Judy, made the concepts Pat talks about very real to them. "And they felt they were a part of it. It was a gift."

"This is the kind of interest we need," Pat responds.

She always has simmering in the back of her mind various projects a group could do.

"A lot of work was done on the house initially," says Barbara Harrison of the MOMMAS core group "but there's always something that needs to be done."

She adds invitingly that "it's a great place to bring children." She and Pat often bring their own youngsters with them to lend a hand at the house.

Barbara's sister and brother-in-law brought down from upstate Rome their Christian Mission Alliance youth group for a work weekend.

There's a need, she and Pat point out, for handyman work, carpentry, numerous repairs. The basement needs still more work. "There's a big hole-in the ceiling, and it's very damp. We just don't have the people to do it, yet there's such a desperate need for emergency housing," says Pat.

"And we'd like to put in a garden. We need help with that. It never got off the ground this year."

One couple, Maryellen and Bob Raubach, came up with a volunteer idea of their own. "They decided all the girls needed one night out a week," says Pat. "They come and babysit so the mothers can have some time for themselves."

The girls could benefit from informal classes in sewing, cooking, typing, crafts. "You don't need to have a degree to teach," adds Pat. "There are so many things these girls need to know to survive. And we don't have the time to do it all."

House relief — giving Allison, the live-in staff person a chance to get away for an evening or weekend — is welcomed, as is child care.

"There's a real crisis in child care," Pat says. "It's very hard to find infant day care. It costs \$3.75 an hour, and the mother isn't bringing home \$3.75 an hour from her job!"

A girl can get help from the Department of Social Services in paying for day care when she gets a job. "But first she has to find the job, start working and get two paychecks." That process can take months.

"Then she can pick out a day care mother from the list — that is, if there's one in the area she can get to without a car."

So volunteers to babysit — either at the house or to pick up a baby and return it at the end of the day — are in great need.

Transportation to take a girl to the hospital, to the doctor, is always needed.

And Pat would like to see people "willing to take a girl and her baby home for the day and have them stay for dinner" or even informally "adopt" a girl.

"That gives more to their lives," she says, which can at times be very bleak.

Pat would also like to see school classes "adopt" a girl for Christmas, so that the girl and her baby would have some joy in their lives too at that festive season.

There are many things the young mothers and the house need: car seats, strollers, crib sheets, diapers, paper supplies, cleaning supplies, food, baby formula, baby furniture. And, of course, money.

Groups have sent in money from fund-raising luncheons they've held.

Some people and groups arrange to send \$10 or \$15 a month on a regular basis. "It's wonderful to have the security of that coming in," says Pat.

For more information, to volunteer or to donate, contact Birthright, 3402 Park Ave., Wantagh, N.Y. 11793; phone 785-4070.

