

A MOTHER'S JOY



ANYONE NOT IN THE KNOW COULD BE FORGIVEN FOR BELIEVING PAT SHEA '62ED IS THE MOMMA REFERRED TO IN MOMMAS HOUSE.

Principal photography
by August Johnson '08C

Photo this page
by Belenna Lauto '81C

Above: Pat Shea reads a story to one of the children at MOMMAS House.

Opposite page: Amaya and Stephanie, residents of the home in Jericho.



Perhaps it's her eyes, warm with the compassion she so clearly feels for pregnant young women, or the steely authority lurking just beneath the surface when she discusses the rules the residents must follow. Or maybe it's the passion for her work and the love you sense she has for those she has helped. "It obviously was in God's plan that this is what I should be doing with my life," Shea says. "It's about opening yourself up to being led to where you are supposed to be."

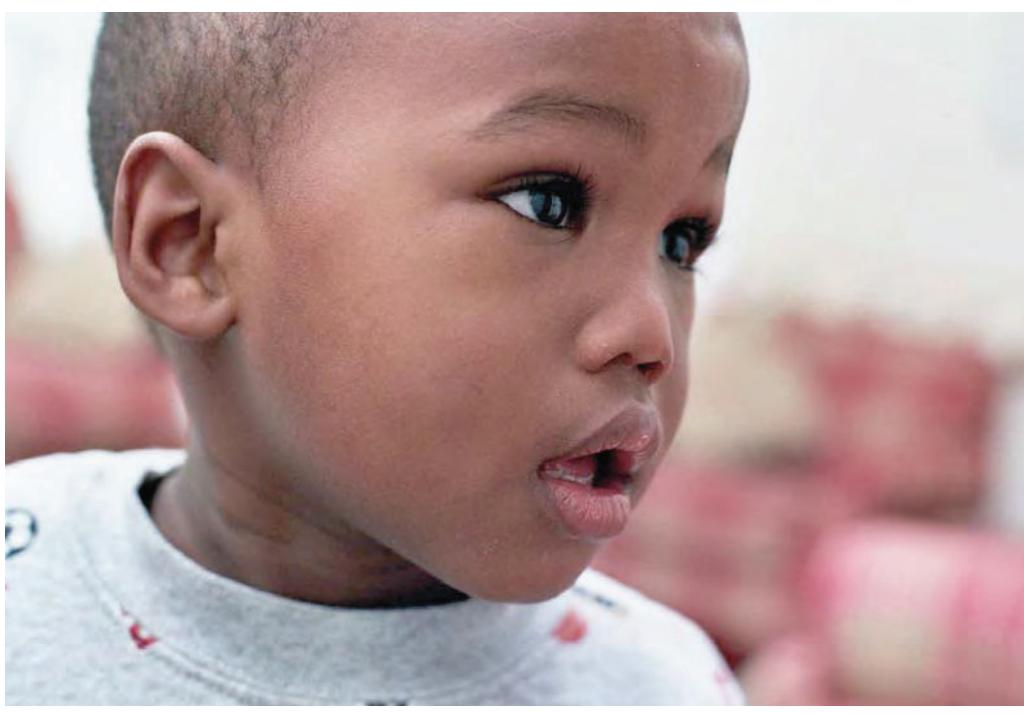
For the record, there is no momma in MOMMAS House, as it stands for "Mary Our Model Mothering Adolescent Services." Shea is the executive director and founder of the Long Island, NY-based organization that aids young, single, homeless mothers ages 17 to 21 years and their babies. The young women and their children live in a residential home for a maximum of two years where the mothers are able to continue their education or vocational experience while also receiving support for life skills such as parenting and personal finance. Each home provides daycare for the children as well as a social worker and the goal is to enable the young women to become self sufficient and responsible parents. They have chores, rules to follow and their own room. For some, it's the first time they have had such stability and structure. "It's a family atmosphere," Shea says simply.

At the head of that family is Shea — herself the mother of five — who spends as much time with the children and their

mothers as she does attending to her administrative duties. She fights for the residents, pulling together funding from grants and donations. She understands the young women she serves and they instinctively feel her sincerity. "We love their babies and we think [the mothers] are wonderful and courageous," Shea says. "Our expectations are realistic because we know where many of the girls are coming from."

MOMMAS House began in 1986 as an outgrowth of Birthright of Nassau/Suffolk County, which provides pregnancy services for young women. Shea says it soon became apparent that these young mothers-to-be also needed housing so volunteers started taking them into their homes. "Very quickly we realized that they needed a lot more than a bed to sleep in, they needed a whole program," Shea now recalls. "They needed schooling, training and parenting classes so we had to develop something more viable." Moved by the need for such a program, a prayer group committed themselves to praying for MOMMAS House and one of the group's members, Joe Haley, so believed in the concept that he purchased a home and the first MOMMAS House opened in Wantagh, NY.

That original house closed and other homes sprouted throughout Long Island in Malverne, Brookville and Glen Cove thanks in part to the generosity of parishes which offered the use of buildings, rent free. In 2002, the program moved out of the



Left: A young former resident of the Brookville home.

Bottom: Jericho resident Sharon and her son Elijah.

Malverne location and a year later the organization purchased a home in East Massapequa, NY, to serve as transitional housing for MOMMAS House residents to move to when they complete living in the group home. The Brookville location closed after 14 years, and the organization relocated to a home in Jericho, NY. A third home recently opened in Hempstead, NY.

Running a not-for-profit organization was not at all the career path Shea planned. She was a math major in The School of Education while at St. John's with plans to

teach, but that never happened. At the University, she was recruited to participate in mission work for the summer in Mexico which she did right after graduation. "I had never seen real poverty and the effects it had on people, especially the children," she says. "I came back and decided I wasn't going to teach." Instead, she opted to go into social work. Her father, John Connell '35C, was more than a bit surprised at her change of plans. "He could barely speak for about a week," Shea says, smiling.

Many of the participants today are thankful for Shea's change of heart. Joan Phillips was one of the first residents of the Wantagh location more than 20 years ago and now is a married mother of three. But back then, Phillips was a young, unmarried mother whose family told her she couldn't come home with her baby. "Raising a child alone is scary and society puts a lot of pressure on these girls," Phillips says. "Pat sees the success these girls can become and she doesn't even look for a thank you." Shea's help had such a profound influence on Phillips life that she now works for MOMMAS House as a supervisor and serves on the Board of Directors. She can't say enough wonderful things about the woman who was there for her in her time of need. "Pat has a huge heart and she is just so kind," says Phillips, who recently completed a master's degree in social work. "She just gives and gives and gives."



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Above: A group of residents and their children enjoy some playtime at the home in Jericho.

Below: Katherine holds her daughter, Rhianna, in the Jericho home.



Shea is also generous to *alma mater*. Students have ventured to the homes to participate in service-learning projects and Service Day activities and Shea has returned to campus to speak about her experiences. Belenna Lauto, an associate professor of fine arts at St. John's, first started volunteering at MOMMAS House in 1997 and has also served on the board. Over the years, she has photographed the residents and borne witness to the bond between Shea and the young mothers. "I remember once

Pat threw a birthday party for one of the girls and the girl burst into tears because she had never had a birthday cake before," Lauto recalls. "She really gives them hope." Shea also takes a personal interest in their lives, Lauto says. "Pat is really like a Mom to them and she's very strict," Lauto says. "If they don't follow the rules they can't stay there and I think that's very important because

she teaches them accountability." Each home has only a few residents and Shea dreams of the day she can open a building with apartments for residents as well as space for a job training program, a healthcare site and a daycare facility that would be open to the community. And, of course, she desires to see more group homes. "We could fill 10 houses," she says. "The need is great. Nobody else was addressing the need at the time we started and it still is woefully inadequate to the amount of young women and their babies that need to be someplace safe."

Shea's daughter, Deirdre Shea '04C, serves as assistant director and the elder Shea says she feels a deep sense of relief that when she is ready to retire, her daughter will be able to continue her vision of helping mothers and their children. For Pat Shea, there can be no greater calling. "I truly feel blessed that I found work to do that impacts people's lives," Shea says. "I really feel that I have been able to reach some people and help them. What more can you ask for in life than to know that you have made things a little bit better for someone else while you are here?"