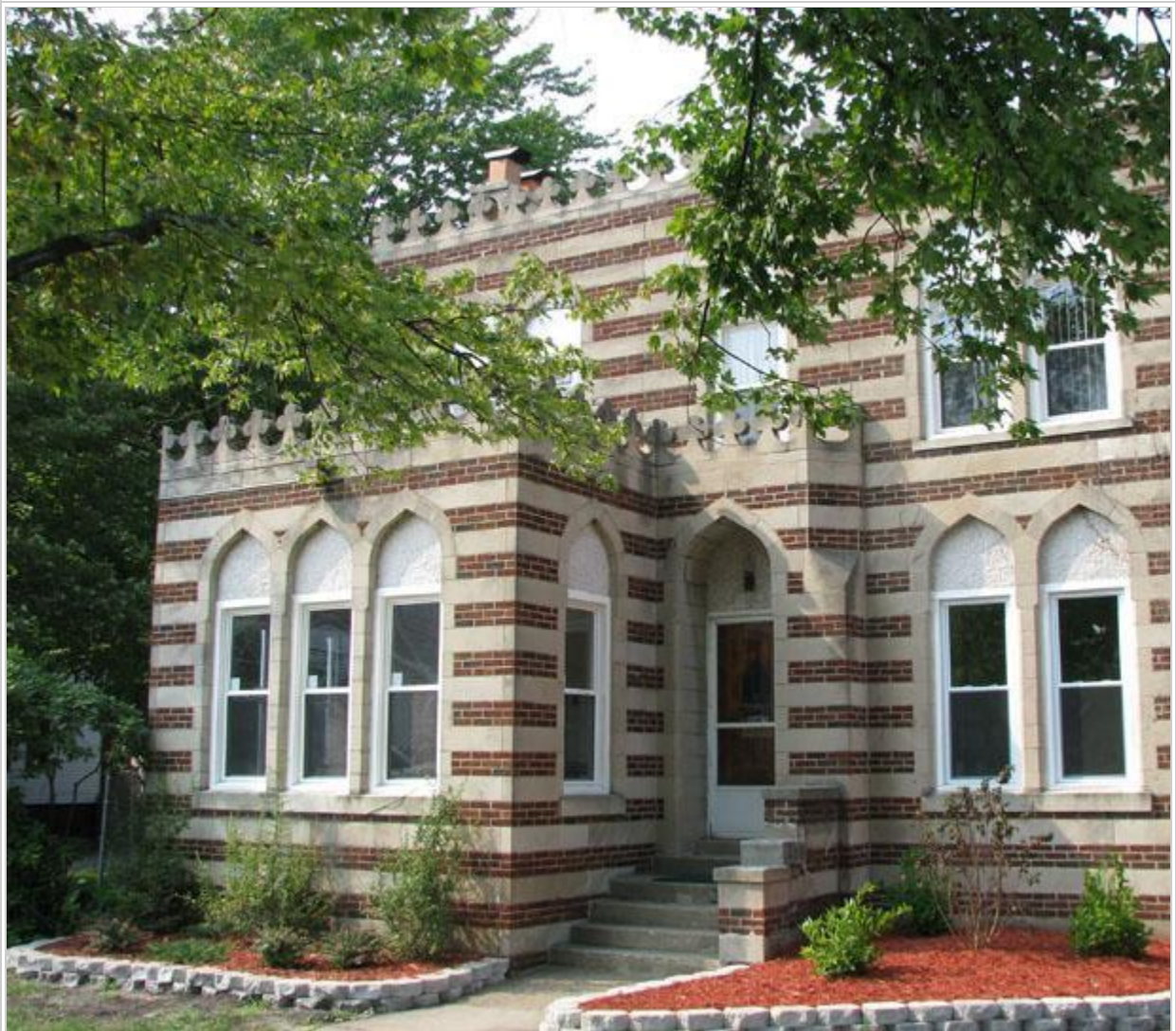


Jim Musial: 'Y' is a Sand Castle success story



The Sand Castle Shelter for Homeless Families is located at 1005 W. 8th St. in Michigan City. Photo provided

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Editor's note: This is the first in a monthly series of columns by Sand Castle Shelter for Homeless Families Executive Director Jim Musial. In these columns, names will be changed to initials to protect the identities of those involved.

"Y" came to Sand Castle with three children in tow, 11-, 9-, and 6-year-old sons. She had lost her job of eight years at a government agency and, the house she and her family had been living in was condemned. Her unemployment had run out and court-ordered child support was not being received. She had not applied for and was not receiving public aid. She had no income whatsoever. She had been staying with family but was forced to leave because of overcrowded conditions. It goes without saying, Y came to Sand Castle desperate, with little hope and fearing for the safety and wellbeing of her family.

Determined to provide for her family, Y rolled up her sleeves and got to work. Having an Associate's Degree and eight years of office experience, she was employable. Y immediately took advantage of the Grace Learning Center, another program of Citizens Concerned for the Homeless, located next door to Sand Castle Shelter and where people can receive a variety of educational assistance. Grace Learning Center has several classes available for our resident families (as well as residents of La Porte County), and participation is required if the resident is not working.

Those classes include Basic Computer Skills Workshop, Resume Writing Workshop, Searching for Jobs on the Internet Workshop, Banking and Budgeting Classes (taught by PNC Bank) and others. She created a new resume and took the classes designed to aid in job searching on the internet. Also, Y spent some time applying for jobs at the Lighthouse Mall, which is located two short blocks from Sand Castle. Within 10 days of her enrollment at Sand Castle, Y had her first interview. In addition to her resume, we were happy to send her to the interview with a letter of recommendation. Y was not hiding the fact that she was staying with us, but rather used her residency here as an indication that she was utilizing all resources for the betterment of her family. And because in the short time she had been at Sand Castle she showed initiative and leadership at our facility, we were happy to offer a letter of recommendation on her behalf.

In addition to all of the other work being done by Y at the Grace Learning Center, she had time to participate in Life Skill Classes offered by Sand Castle. Sand Castle offers evening classes, including Flight School (a cognitive behavior therapy class designed and taught by Michelle Alexander, LCSW), Nutrition Class (taught by Jody Kutch, a Family Nutrition Program Assistant from Purdue University Extension La Porte County) and a Smoking Cessation Class (taught by Sand Castle Shelter Director Jim Musial). Y worked several of these classes in addition to looking for work, tending to her children and her assigned cleaning chores around Sand Castle Shelter. Never once did Y complain or shirk her responsibilities. To say she was a model resident would be an understatement. The other single moms looked up to her and sought her advice and opinion on several life topics, and she always had the time to help and support when asked by others.

Upon enrollment, Y's three boys immediately began working with tutors provided by A.K. Smith in partnership with the Michigan City Area Schools. Sand Castle Shelter is blessed with so many community partners providing programs of support for our families and children. The tutoring program is just one of the support programs. The tutor comes to Sand Castle on Mondays and Thursdays to work with the children on homework, areas of struggle needing attention or just exercises for intellectual growth. Y's three boys enjoyed working with the tutor, actively participated in all work that was asked of them, showed courtesy and respect and maintained good grades while at Sand Castle. The concern is always how children will react to living at Sand Castle, and Y's children adapted as well as can be expected.

Within 10 days of enrollment, Y interviewed for a job at the Lighthouse Mall for an assistant manager's position at one of the retail shops. Five days after that, a second interview and shortly thereafter she was hired, full-time with benefits and a good, sustainable salary. As is the case with all Sand Castle Residents, when this occurs, their program of growth changes from seeking work to saving money and preparing to move into permanent housing. At Sand Castle, residents are required to turn over 75 percent of their net earnings as a forced savings program. Y began saving money and looking for suitable housing for her family. She applied for and was accepted into the Rapid Rehousing Program of Housing Opportunities, a program of Indiana Housing and Community Development Association designed to provide matching dollars to assist families' transition from homeless shelters to permanent housing.

Y didn't rely solely on the support of Rapid Rehousing, but also developed a "Plan B," looking for

housing supportable by her new income alone without the help of Rapid Rehousing Dollars, should that program fall through. Impressive forward thinking from a woman in this position. In this regard, Y was truly inspiring.

Y subsequently left the job at the Mall and took a job as a paraprofessional with the Michigan City Area Schools, working with special needs children. In addition, when a job opportunity became available at Sand Castle, Y was offered and accepted a part time job as a Resident Technician with our organization. The Resident Technicians work with our families in the evenings and on the weekends, assisting them with an after hours job and housing searches as well as other Sand Castle program requirements. Because of her experience, her personality and her resolve, Y now assists other families in working the Sand Castle programs and in acquiring the tools for growth necessary to return to independence.

Y was a "poster child" for how the Sand Castle model is supposed to work. An intelligent, hard working mom who was caught up by life circumstances and a series of unfortunate issues which lead Y to us. Not looking for a hand out, she embraced Sand Castle's Program of engagement and empowerment and as a result returned to self-sufficiency in a very short period of time. Y continues to impress and amaze this Director as to her talent, her spirit and her leadership capabilities. Having been the helped, Y is now the helper.

Sand Castle Shelter is located at 1005 W. 8th St. in Michigan City. It's a program of Citizens Concerned for the Homeless, and organization serving Michigan City and La Porte County for the last 20 years.