

Sand Castle Shelter: The incredible story of 'J'

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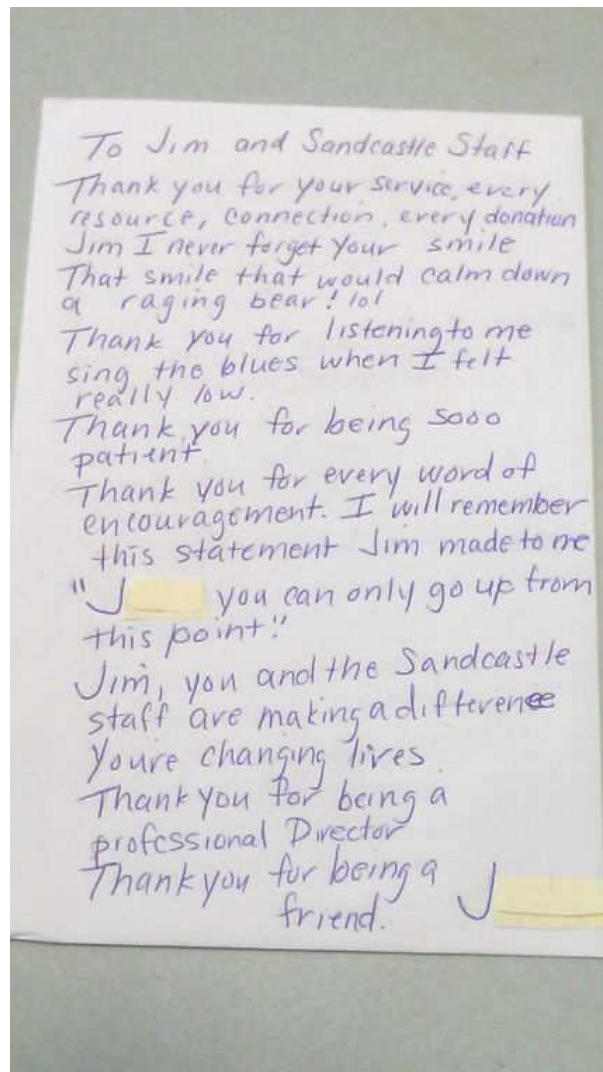
Editor's note: This is the second in a monthly article series spotlighting family success stories from Sand Castle Shelter for Homeless Families. Sand Castle Shelter is located at 1005 W. 8th Street in Michigan City and is a program of Citizens Concerned for the Homeless, an organization serving Michigan City and the greater La Porte County area for the last 20 years.

J came to Sand Castle with her six children, ages 9, 8, 5, 4, 2 and six months. To say that J had her hands full is an understatement. To compound her troubles, her husband and father to her six children had just been sentenced to a very lengthy prison term and she had lost almost all of her family support.

In addition, she had been a full-time stay-at-home mom and had no work experience. Except for food stamps, J had no income whatsoever. She had been staying with family but was forced to leave because of overcrowded conditions. J came to Sand Castle with the most desperate of circumstances, she had little hope and was extremely depressed and angry. She feared for the safety and future of her family.

Despite these tragic circumstances, J was determined to make a better life for her family. J told us she would do whatever it took to "right the ship". With only a GED in hand, she was uncertain of her employability, but knew she had to work to survive. The first order of business was to obtain some day care relief. To do so, J signed up for the IMPACT Jobs Program here in Michigan City. Once signed up, J would receive job training and placement assistance, but would receive a referral to KV Works, which supplied her day care vouchers so her children would be looked after as J prepared for the workforce.

In addition, on days when J was not at the IMPACT office, she was hard at work at the Grace Learning Center, another program of Citizens Concerned for the Homeless. Grace Learning Center, located next door to Sand Castle Shelter, offers classes available for Sand Castle resident families (as well as residents



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A thank you letter from "J" to the staff at Sand Castle.

of La Porte County) and participation is required if the resident is not working. Those classes include Basic Computer Skills Workshop, Resume Writing Workshop, Internet Job Search Workshop, Banking and Budgeting Classes (taught by PNC Bank) and others. J created a new resume and took the classes designed to aid in job searching on the internet. Within a very short period of time, J secured two part-time but well-paying jobs and was working a total of 50 hours per week.

With the beginning of a new school semester, J again took an aggressive course of action. She wanted the very best for her school-age children and researched private schools. Filling out numerous applications and navigating the various systems, she received (through the voucher system) full enrollment in private school for her three school-aged children. Once school began, her children worked with the Sand Castle tutors provided through A.K. Smith Career Center.

Things were really going very well for J, but it was at this point that she ran into a brick wall — housing. Despite her determined growth and multiple successes through the Sand Castle Program, she could not find anyone willing to rent to her, in part due to the size of her family. I found this frustrating and unfair, because due to fantastic parenting skills, J's children were among the most respectful and well-behaved that had ever graced our facility.

I give J a lot of credit. Despite the obstacles, J accepted words of encouragement and support and never lost hope. With the help of SCS and related organizations, she found a small house. She remained with her head high, sleeves rolled up and working feverishly every day to better her family.

In addition to pounding the pavement daily to look for housing, J also worked closely with the Rapid Rehousing Program of Housing Opportunities searching for a place to live. I even took the search to our local Continuum of Care, the Home Team of La Porte County. The Home Team, comprised of the organizations who provide services and funding to fight the homeless issues of La Porte County, meets monthly to discuss programs, new developments and troubleshoot issues. With all of these groups and agencies helping J, she found a three-bedroom house within her price range on the very same block where her children were going for day care. Things began looking up for J and her family.

During a residents' stay, Sand Castle's programs of growth change from seeking work to saving money and preparing to move into permanent housing. J began saving money the day she drew her first paycheck. By the time she had found her house, J had saved more than \$1,000. 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. Because of the time she lived at Sand Castle and worked her growth program, and for credits earned for classes taken at Grace Learning Center, J earned matching dollars of over \$5,800, which was applied over time toward the rent payments on her new home.

As moving day was approached, J had no furniture whatsoever. This was our first contact with Marv LaRue, known around our shelter as "Marv the Furniture Guy." Marv Larue and his organization, known as the New Carlisle Community Reserve, have helped Sand Castle families on several occasions begin

their journey.

They are part of the Faith in Action Committee of the New Carlisle Wesleyan Church. This volunteer group works to generate donations of gently used furniture and household items. The donations are stored in the CRIB (Community Reserve Inventory Barn). to self-sufficiency. Part of the Faith in Action Committee of the New Carlisle Wesleyan Church, Marv and the CRIB (Community Resource Inventory Barn) has become one of our best and most generous community partners.

When moving day arrived, Marv opened the CRIB to J, who was able to furnish her entire home, at no cost. Marv was moved by J's timely arrival, the fact that she brought enough hands to help load and that she showed genuine appreciation for what she received.

J is yet another prime example for how the model for Sand Castle Shelter for Homeless Families works. An intelligent, hard-working mom who was caught up by life circumstances and a series of unfortunate issues led J to us. In addition to her hard work, J's story is evidence of how our wonderful community partners pull together to help families recover and grow.

J continues to thrive in our community, and checks in with us from time to time. Her appreciation is shown in the thank you card pictured, which we keep as a reminder of how blessed we are to have been given the chance to serve.

Sand Castle Shelter for the Homeless Executive Director Jim Musial can be reached by phone at 879-2552 or via email at mhomeless@ameritech.net. Visit the website at www.citizens4homeless.org to contribute.