

Provider

PROFILE

BETHANY HOUSE

A Long-Term Shelter Offers Abused Women a Chance for a New Life

For women seeking to free themselves from a relationship with an abusive partner, Bethany House, Toledo, OH, offers an opportunity to heal and begin building a new life for themselves and their children.

Sponsored by the Sisters of St. Francis of Sylvania, OH, Bethany House provides long-term shelter for abused women and their children. Bethany House is one of only three long-term shelters for abused women in the United States.

Bethany House was founded in 1984 by Sr.

said, "Well, I'm going to try."

Sr. Lange found an old convent suitable for a long-term shelter and then began to look for funding to get the project off the ground. "It was all started on faith," she notes. "For the first few years, we were often unsure where the money would come from for the next month's utility bills, but we somehow managed to work our way through."

According to Sr. Faith Cosky, OSF, who became director of Bethany House in July 1990, new residents must sign a contract for three months obligating them to abide by the house's rules and to meet specific goals. "They agree to do what they can to make their lives better while they're here," Sr. Cosky explains. "This may mean furthering their education, as well as learning to live on a budget, to become a better mother, and to improve life skills."

After women have been at the shelter for three months, they renegotiate their contracts. A nine-month stay is the normal maximum, but some women who have been meeting their goals and have special needs have remained a year or more in the nurturing environment of Bethany House.



In addition to her administrative duties, Sr. Cosky helps residents adjust to life at Bethany House.

The shelter's primary purpose is to prepare residents for more independent living. Women who are able pay rent of \$65 a month. Each woman and child (with the exception of infants) has a private room. The women buy their own food and prepare

meals for themselves and their children in the shelter's kitchen.

Bethany House residents must accept responsibility for running their own lives in order to stay on at the shelter. "The reason that many of them stayed with their abuser was that they were used to staying in a dependent situation," Sr. Cosky explains. "Sometimes the women found it easier to stay with the men, even though they had to tolerate a lot of

pain."

The shelter's well-established routine is important for these women, who may be feeling confused. "Often they come from such chaos that the structure here is the only thing that can give their lives some stability," Sr. Cosky points out. "We've got a curfew, and they know that they've got to appear at parenting class, be a part of their support group, and be in individual counseling on a weekly basis.

Often they come from such chaos that the structure here is the only thing that can give their lives some stability.

Therese Lange, OSF, who was director until 1990 and now serves as development director. "No one was doing anything to meet these women's longer-term needs," she explains, "and so I

It's not just a shelter—a place to be until something else comes up. You have to work when you're here."

Sr. Cosky carefully evaluates potential residents' suitability for the long-term program offered at Bethany House. At the local crisis center she meets with women who have been referred by the center's staff. These women have to read the Bethany House handbook and demonstrate that they understand what the shelter expects of them. About a week later, Sr. Cosky brings them to the house to meet the residents. After that, they are given a chance to think about moving to Bethany House, during which time Sr. Cosky remains in touch with staff at the

crisis shelter. "The women have to show that they really want to make their lives better before we will take them in," Sr. Cosky says.

The women have to show that they really want to make their lives better before we will take them in.

Although fund-raising continues to be a challenge, Bethany House has attracted increased community support. In November 1990 the UPS Foundation awarded the shelter a \$100,000 grant earmarked for counseling fees and for covering expenses for moving to a new facility—a 3-story, 17-bed-

room convent. In addition, the shelter now receives 15 percent of its county's marriage license fees, which brings in more than \$20,000 a year. As development director, Sr. Lange regularly works on grants and speaks to local churches and organizations about the program at Bethany House.

Perhaps the biggest challenge the shelter's staff has faced is to keep pace with the changing needs and problems of the women they serve. The job has gotten more difficult in recent years. "We've noticed that the women are a lot younger and a lot more impoverished," Sr. Cosky says. "We've also noticed more resistance to the coun-



"It was all started on faith," says Sr. Lange, founder of Bethany House.

seling and to the parenting classes. We've learned that poverty has narrowed their horizons, so that the values we espouse tend to be foreign to them."

To get a better perspective on the situa-

tion of abused women, Sr. Lange recently sent out a 30-item survey to women at crisis shelters throughout the United States. Respondents were asked to describe their relationship with abusive partners, whether they were abused as children or adolescents, whether they sought help from outside sources, and why they decided to leave the abuser.

"I believe that one of the problems these women have is that they lack positive role modeling," Sr. Lange concludes. "But I wanted to try to find out some of the reasons they got to be where they are." She plans to use the information in talking to groups about Bethany House and the women they try to help.

—Phil Rheinecker

One Woman's Success Story

Cathie Kelly came to Bethany House in February 1986. Kelly had been in a relationship with an abusive partner for seven years, and this was her third attempt to leave him. She brought three children with her—14-year-old Brian, 2-year-old David, and 7-month-old Sara. Sara, who was on a heart monitor, had been diagnosed as a potential victim of sudden infant death syndrome. Her problems may have been caused by abuse her mother suffered during pregnancy.

"The first thing Bethany House gave me was a secure place to sleep," Kelly recalls. "It was phenomenal to know that I was safe, that my kids were safe, and that I had a chance."

As part of her contract with Bethany House, Kelly agreed to avoid contact with her ex-husband and to participate in group and individual counseling. She also entered the Toledo Family Life Center's Displaced Homemaker Program, which helps people who have been out of the workforce for more than a year develop a variety of skills

essential to making the transition to the workplace.

When an assessment of her skills and interests indicated that Kelly might enjoy working with computers, she enrolled in a computer electronics program at Owens Technical College in Toledo.

In February 1987 Kelly moved out of Bethany House into low-income housing in the Toledo area. Soon after, she received an associate's degree from Owens and began working on a bachelor's degree in organization and education at the University of Toledo, which she completed in 1988. At that time she took a job as an electronics technician at Owens Technical College. She is currently in charge of the computer laboratory at Owens and teaches courses on the fundamentals of computers.

Kelly bought her own home in May 1991. Sometime this year she anticipates finishing work on a master's degree in educational psychology. She keeps in close contact with friends from Bethany House and returns occasionally to talk to the women.