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SPOTLIGHT CENTERPIECE

Union Street guests share stories, hope to help others experiencing homelessness

By PHILIP WEYHE pweyhe@stpeterherald.com

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For young couple Joaquim and Jessica, being homeless was no longer an option. To keep their young daughter, Journey, safe and healthy, they needed stable housing.

That's exactly what Union Street Place in St. Peter provided. The emergency housing shelter, established by Partners for Affordable Housing in 2019 at the old St. Peter Motel, offers seven sleeping rooms for individuals or families in need, along with shared common areas. It's a facility that can save lives today and positively impact more down the road.



Jessica and Joaquim recently moved in to Union Street with their young daughter, Journey, aiming to get back on their feet before establishing more permanent stable housing. (Philip Weyhe/St. Peter Herald)

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"I just want to get to a point where I'm not worried about paying next month's rent; I want to be able to be stable in a job, get back to school," said Jessica. "I have my daughter, and a three-year son with my mom also, and I would just like, from here, to stop it with us. We have to have something to show our kids when they're older."

Homelessness comes in many different forms; it's not just sleeping on park benches or sitting on a city sidewalk with a change bucket. It's living out of your car, hopping from couch to couch, overstaying your welcome at shelters;

spending your last saved money on a motel room. Homelessness means running out of options, burning your last bridges, wondering what stone you may have left unturned.

Homes For All, a coalition of more than 250 Minnesota organizations advocating for housing stability statewide, and the local members in it, like local Partners for Affordable Housing, want to create real and long-term solutions for the problem of housing insecurity. These organizations provide emergency shelter, but what they really want to help provide is a future for those who may not currently see one.

"It's not enough to just let people stay somewhere for the night," PAH Executive Director Jen Thenemann said. "We have to let people get to that next stage."

Back on their feet

Joaquim and Jessica are feeling optimistic about their future, but that wasn't always the case.

Jessica is originally from Houston. When she was young, she moved to Minnesota to be with her dad. But that didn't work out so well. So she learned to live with out any real home.

"I stayed on friends' couches; sometimes there are shelters in the (Twin Cities), but it's really hard to find one, because there is a waiting list or they're only for families," she said.

About three years ago, she had her son. The father didn't stick around, and she was left on her own. She eventually had to cede care to her mother, who had a more stable living situation.

Joaquim started with his family in Africa, before they moved together to the United States. He started in school, but he wasn't able to keep up and he dropped out. His father wasn't OK with that and kicked him out of the home. That's when things really got bad.

"I ended up on the streets, and when I was out there, I got into trouble, and I got a few felonies," he said. "I went to jail, and after I came home, it was hard to get a job with my record, so I was homeless for a couple years."

He found the same problems as Jessica in the metro area.

"They have shelters over there, but they let you stay the night and then kick you out," he said. "They didn't have any resources to get you back on your feet."

The two met and quickly became a support system for one another. Last summer, they were able to get an apartment, using emergency assistance funds to pay the deposit. But Joaquim still had major barriers to a stable job with felonies on his record and no money or resources to get the documentation needed to help him. Jessica, meanwhile, had to go on maternity leave, as their daughter was soon to be born.

"We couldn't pay rent, so we were evicted," Jessica said.



Joaquim uses the kitchen at Union Street Place in St. Peter. He and his girlfriend, Jessica, are raising a young daughter together and are using the emergency housing facility to get back on their feet. (Philip Weyhe/St. Peter Herald)

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That's when the two came to Union Street in St. Peter. It was a move away from the territory they knew in the metro and into an unfamiliar small community. But it turned out to be exactly what they needed.

"We've been staying here for about two months, and that's been going well. There are more resources down here than in the cities," Jessica said.

Joaquim added, "My goal now is to get my documents together to work, but more important, get these felonies off my record, so when we do get a place, I can put my name on the lease and we can move forward."

Making an impact



Homes for All Engagement Co-Chair Matt Traynor, right, speaks with a group at the St. Peter Food Shelf building Feb. 4. Home for All, a statewide coalition of more than 250 organizations promoting housing stability, is hoping for a \$500 million per biennium investment in affordable housing from the Minnesota Legislature. (Philip Weyhe/St. Peter Herald)

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In an effort to get the affordable housing discussion moving at the Legislature this spring, Homes For All held kickoff events in communities across the state in January and February. In St. Peter, the event was held at the Food Shelf building, and PAH helped lead the way. Current and past clients of Union Street Place and Solace Apartments, a St. Peter housing complex for those coming out of treatment, were invited to speak at the event and share their stories.

The guests were very open about their experiences.

A young woman named Amanda said she was a working professional before becoming a stay-at-home mom to raise her three daughters. But her relationship turned abusive, and she was forced to leave the home. She ended up living out of her minivan.

"I lost everything," she said.

She got lost in drugs and was unable to pull herself out. She finally got into rehabilitation, but coming out, "I had very little hope that I was going to make it." But she was accepted into Solace in St. Peter and suddenly there is a path in front of her.

"I have a home; I have my kids now," she said. "I wish I could give it to everybody, because it's very difficult to come back from a dark place."



Linda, Jessica, Joaquim, Amanda, April and Sanday, all in front facing the crowd, shared their stories of homelessness and housing insecurity at a Homes For All event in St. Peter. (Philip Weyhe/St. Peter Herald)

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Another woman, Sandy, also had a professional career before falling into homelessness. She said she "had a very good job" but she struggled with alcoholism, which she noted is a disease. She left her job over stress, a decision

influenced by her addiction. And she then got a DWI. She found herself in jail at age 48.

"When I got out of jail, I was homeless," she said. "I had owned homes in the past, so being homeless was a shocker."

She eventually landed in treatment and later back in jail. But then she met Jessica Otto, who helped get her to Union Street.

"I had never been in a homeless shelter in my life, but it was the best thing I could've done," she said. "I was then taken to Solace, and things are going so much better for me. I'm in therapy; I've reached sobriety. I have time to work on what I need to work on, so I can go and get a different type of job again."

Amanda is originally from Arizona, but moved with her husband to Utah and then Minnesota, where they were homeless with their two children. She said she is a recovering addict, who went to inpatient treatment in 2018. She then stayed at one of the Mankato Partners for Affordable Housing shelters for about three months, before getting in to Solace. She choked up before explaining what that meant.

"On July 23, 2019, my husband finally came home," she said with tears on her cheek. "Solace has given me my family back."

Affordable housing

Like any important topic at the Minnesota Legislature, affordable housing has to compete for attention and funding. But advocates, like those at Homes for All and its many organizations, believe affordable housing should be at the top of the list.

The coalition is calling for the Legislature to create \$500 million in bonding dollars this biennium (two-year state budget) to build and preserve affordable homes across the state. That's a lofty goal, and Democratic Gov. Tim Walz administration's support of \$276 million in funding would indicate that \$500 million is unlikely. But Homes for All still expressed gratitude for the proposal, which is a big jump from previous administrations' proposals.

"This announcement more than doubles the proposed housing investment by any previous administration and signifies a commitment to addressing the affordable housing crisis and the thousands of cost burdened Minnesotans across the state," said Home for All co-chair Allison Streich.

The affordable housing component of the governor's plan includes \$200 million in housing infrastructure bonds that would be awarded to developers statewide through a competitive process. It also includes \$60 million for rehabilitating public housing. He also recommended \$14.9 million for modernizing state-run veterans homes.

Housing Commissioner Jennifer Ho said they decided to "go big" with the request.

"Across our communities large and small, we need more housing," she said. "We're 50,000 units short. And we're especially short on housing for our lowest income neighbors, those who earn less than \$30,000 a year."

Borrowing packages, known as bonding bills, are usually the top items on the Legislature's agenda in even-numbered years. It will be up to a Democratic House and Republican Senate to send a final bonding bill (or multiple) to Walz's desk, and how much of that will be set aside for housing remains a question mark. There is also the possibility that no bill is passed at all.



Union Street Place in St. Peter is an emergency housing shelter set up by Partners for Affordable Housing. Formerly the St. Peter Motel, it includes seven private sleeping rooms and shared common spaces. (Philip Weyhe/St. Peter Herald)

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Nonprofits, like PAH, are going to keep working on the homelessness and housing security issue, but at the end of the day, facilities like Union Street and Solace need funding to be created. It's up to legislators, and those who vote them in, to decide where affordable housing falls in the ever expanding spectrum of important issues needing funding.

For the time being, individuals like Joaquim and Jessica can only hope that sharing their story will help someone else. There is not much else they can do but to help themselves.

"I think my biggest goal," Jessica said, "is to get to a point where I don't have any stress about whether my children have anywhere to sleep tonight."

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