



Raised by an alcoholic mother and without her birth father, **Cordiella James found out she was pregnant while she was in jail in Orange County.**

Her future at the time seemed bleak, but today, **Cordiella says her life is full of blessings.** She has learned how to manage her finances, is an office manager at a manufacturing employment agency, and has an apartment where she lives with her son.

Cordiella credits much of her transformation to the help and resources she received from Precious Life Shelter, a homeless shelter for pregnant women in Los Alamitos, California. She says the shelter and its programs saved her life.

“When I entered the doors of the shelter, of course I was scared, I didn’t know what to expect, I didn’t even know I was going to stay there,” she told CNA.

“I’ve just been very, very blessed. I just thank God and I thank the community for putting their part into Precious Life Shelter.”

Cordiella is one of more than 3,000 pregnant, homeless women who have come through the doors of Precious Life Shelter since 1989. The goal, said executive director Theresa Murphy, is helping women not only to get off the street, but to become self-sufficient.

About half of the women who move beyond the first stage of the programs offered by Precious Life Shelter will remain in the job market, continue parenting their child, save money, and move into independent living, she told CNA.

Unfortunately, she noted, other women fall back into their former life. The transition out of homelessness can be extremely difficult, and even a 50 percent success rate is very encouraging.

Precious Life Shelter was founded by Theresa Sherrin, a volunteer at a local women’s center. One day, she and her husband received a call from the center that a young woman there was in need of a safe place to stay until her child was born.

The Sherrins, who already had six children, offered her room at their home until she had the baby, whom she placed up for adoption. After she left, the family went on to open the doors of their home to more than 44 pregnant women. Seeing how great the need was, they eventually opened Precious Life Shelter in Los Alamitos at the beginning of 1989.

“They really realized how many women did not have a safe place to stay and have their child, and the danger of termination or abuse was very great. That was the birthing of Precious Life Shelter,” continued Murphy, who has been with organization since the beginning.

The first shelter contained just six beds and two cribs, but the organization has since expanded to 32 beds and an infant care center, where daycare services are provided for 10 children under the age of two. The organization will usually see around 80-100 women a year.

Precious Life focuses heavily on teaching women to be self-sufficient, with the help of three programs to address various needs.

The first step is the Emergency Program, a short-term solution for pregnant women to have immediate shelter for up to 30 nights. This allows women to remove themselves from negative situations, such as relationship violence, drug abuse, or prostitution.

Since the organization does not allow women to repeat any level of the program, residents at this stage have the opportunity to decide whether to pursue the next step, the Transitional Program. Here, women have lodging for about two to six months, or until about two months after their baby’s birth. During that time, they participate in several character and professional development classes. They are also encouraged to reunite with their families to develop a proper support system.

If reunification with family is not possible, then the women may apply for the Single Parent Efficiency Program, which allows the mother to stay until the child is two years old. In order to qualify, the residents must have a full-time job and participate in more self-improvement courses.

For Cordiella, the programs at Precious Life Shelter offered support in gathering the identification documents necessary to find a job, and maintaining accountability in fighting substance abuse.

“Anything that you need, they help you out with...When I entered the program, I had 25 dollars and a bag of clothes, that weren’t even mine...to (now) having a two-bedroom apartment for me and my son,” Cordiella told CNA.

“They give you an apartment, so you have to learn how to clean it, to maintain it, to take care of your child, while holding down a full-time job.”

Although reconnecting with her parents would not be healthy right now, Cordiella said she has found support through the women at the shelter, calling them her “handpicked family from God.”

As Precious Life continues to grow, Cordiella will be entering the shelter’s new permanent housing program, which will offer four women access to two-bedroom apartments at a discounted rate.

Before entering the program, many of these women have no idea how to take care of themselves or their child, Murphy said.

But their transformations are profound and joy-filled, she continued, explaining that some women even return to give back to the shelter.

“We see those clients coming back to us either as board members, educators and mentors to our clients, or are now paying it forward to share apartments so [other women will] have a safe place to stay,” Murphy said.