



Winter Nights Family Shelter

Overview

Describe the project or ministry that you would like to have considered for the Mary and Gary Becker Award.

Winter Nights Family Shelter is a nonprofit program, formed in 2004, started by **Gwen Watson**, a JustFaith graduate (participated in JF 2001-2002) and others. It provides temporary shelter to homeless families with minor children in partnerships with interfaith congregations throughout Contra Costa County, California. The objective is to care for families, and to support them with services to assist them toward re-housing their family.

Timing of services: The shelter has a season of 36 weeks, from September through mid-June.

Capacity: 8-9 families or 30 individuals (moms, dad, children - newborns through 18).

Location: Winter Nights Family Shelter is located in Contra Costa County, California, near Oakland and San Francisco. The Family Shelter program is located in a series of 18 host faith communities for 2 weeks at a time; the shelter moves every 2-weeks.

How did it come to be?

Shelters in the area had been able to house and feed family members, but few provided services focused on the unique shelter needs of intact homeless families, their babies and children as well as the client management services needed to return an intact family to affordable housing.

Winter Nights sought to change that. Gwen, in her JustFaith studies, realized that she needed to educate the public about the need for shelter and address the fear behind



the resistance. She persisted and organized the community to go forward, relying on faith communities.

“When attempts to use two vacated buildings - one in Orinda and the other in Concord - fell through, it was hard to take. But the failures never dimmed their commitment to find a warm place for those who need it during the cold months...” Randy Meyers, San Ramon Valley Times, November 25, 2004

After an attempt to rent space at the Concord Armory, and then the unoccupied library building in Orinda failed in January 2004 due to push back from local residents, **Gwen Watson, Natalie Russell, and Dorothy Vance, JustFaith Graduates** worked with community groups so they might better understand Winter Nights’ programs clients (families).

Faith groups throughout central Contra Costa County, some having JustFaith graduates from five neighboring parishes, were recruited to donate their facilities and provide volunteers. A collaboration with congregations who donated their facilities, meals and activities was the result.

The First Season:

In October of 2004, 10 months after being rejected by Concord and Orinda, the Winter Nights shelter opened in partnership with congregations who offered their facilities for one week at a time from October through mid-April, 27 weeks (later changed to two weeks).

16 Seasons of Service to Homeless Families: 2004-2021

“Your program is the only program around here that I feel people are treated with love and compassion. I know that because this is what the families tell me. Their families can stay together, and the children are always so happy. It also gives them an opportunity to work, save money and really get up and out of the homeless situation. In addition, Winter Nights does an amazing job of connecting families with housing resources such as shelter inc... We so appreciate all of your work!”

—Vivica Taylor, Director of the Homeless Outreach Program for Education (HOPE), Mt. Diablo Unified School District

Impact

How has the project benefited others? How many lives has the project or ministry impacted? What are the long-term impacts?



Families Sheltered: To date over 396 families have been sheltered, averaging 27 families per season. That represents 1263 mothers, fathers and children. Typically, 60% of the shelter clients are minor children, newborn-18 years old. That means over 758 of those served were children.

Average Stay: The average stay varies with the availability of appropriate housing for families to move into, but it is usually about 3 ½ months or 100 days. Families Housed: 233 families out of 396 (62%) left the shelter for housing. Success in securing housing has ranged from 37% in the early years to 88% last season.

Saving for the future: Winter Nights never charges a family for anything. If a parent is employed, they keep all their income to save for first and last month's rent and deposits.

The Client Population: As a county with both very prosperous and not-so-prosperous towns, Winter Nights has served homeless families from every town in the county and from every walk of life. Babies: It used to be a rare occurrence, maybe one baby every few years. But last year there were 5 babies!

Volunteers: Over the years, 60 interfaith congregations from throughout Contra Costa County have hosted or cohosted the shelter. This current season, 2019/2020, there are 47 congregations volunteering. Approximately 30-45 JustFaith graduates have volunteered since the beginning.

Growth and Change

Evolution of the program:

By 2008 the season's schedule achieved the goal of **2-week** stays per host congregation site.

- **Large family-size tents** to give families more privacy.
- Formal tutoring program began with a team of **Traveling Tutors** who work in pairs on the same night every week for the duration of the season.

In 2018, Winter Nights expanded and added a **Safe Park Program** for families living in their cars.

From a father at the shelter with a wife and 9-year-old son:

I tell the other families to do what they tell you. Bill has been such a big help to me. The way they were at Christmas time - Bill and Judy and the staff and Temple Isaiah - I cried in my tent. It was the first time in four years my son got a real Christmas. I hope every family makes it. The program is designed for people to make it. If you can't make it here, I don't know if you can. We are so thankful for everything they



do for us, all the time. When other families say go out on the weekends, I say save the money. If it costs nothing to live and eat here, I can save on a fast- food salary. Everything is free. Take advantage of the opportunity here. We can save all our money. And there are activities on the weekends.

The Present:

The current program: 2019/2021

Today's Winter Nights Family Shelter comprises:

- A temporary, transitional family shelter operating for 40 weeks, September through mid-June.
- A 16-week Parking Lot Program for families living in their cars.
- Oasis Day Center, available to all Shelter and Parking Lot Program clients for weekday use, showers and client services.

Engagement

The Executive Team of Winter Nights is, in effect, the governing body of Winter Nights.

Winter Nights Management and Administration has a volunteer team of 25.

- The Executive Director of Winter Nights Family Shelter, Judith Stillman, is a volunteer.
- Program Volunteers, administrative: grant writers, marketing and donor development volunteers, newsletter editor, social media and web masters, a financial & accounting advisor, a congregation scheduler.
- Program Volunteers: fourteen Traveling Tutors, a professional Integral Coach, a parent discussion group leader, and a volunteer who has used his own moving van to move shelter equipment and client belongings to the next site, every two weeks.

Engagement of Volunteers

Congregations not only donate their facilities and all meals, but they provide **3,000-4,000 volunteer hours** each season. They find that it is fun to serve. They get a true sense of satisfaction being able to help.

- They gain a personal awareness of the needs, the day-to-day struggles and the circumstances often outside a family's control that can cascaded them into homelessness.
- They see that Shelter families are much like their own.



- Many Winter Nights' volunteers go beyond the shelter to volunteer with other programs to assist families in need.

Shelter Volunteer:

"I think one of the best parts of volunteering for Warm Winter Nights is sharing a meal with our guests and hearing their stories. It raises our awareness of the problems facing many in our area. In talking with one of the men I learned he's been laid off from his job. I'm an engineer and I could tell he knew a lot about construction, but he hasn't been able to find work, money has run out, and now he and his family are homeless. I hope I gave him some encouragement and showed him I cared about him."

Sustainability

Describe how the award funds would help the project or ministry.

Beyond FY 21/22 we hope to address the expanding needs for services for the homeless community in the county:

- More Parking Lot Programs for individuals and families that include services to help all return to housing with more capacity to East Contra Costa County.
- A year-round family Shelter

JFM graduate(s) involvement

Provide some history of the JFM graduates involved in the project or ministry.

It is an honor to pay tribute to Gwen Watson who had the vision and determination to start this project in 2004 after completing the JustFaith program and ensured that it would continue!

Gwen personifies a favorite biblical passage of hers: Micah: 6:8

And what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.

