

Homeless mother of two rebuilding her life

Somehow it seemed unthinkable.

Homeless?

Homeless people came in off the streets and slept in big rooms full of beds.

Unless they didn't.

Because sometimes, they didn't.

Sometimes, they could have a job and live in a townhouse with their kids in suburbia, then find their lives upended, just like that.

Tiffany Miller knows this first-hand.

Her children do too.

They sit at a little wooden table in a cramped, two-room apartment at Sarah's House, the Catholic Charities shelter in a former barrack at Fort Meade in Anne Arundel County.

The mother speaks of pain, heartbreak, hard lessons – and blessings.

Not least, being here, on this gorgeous afternoon in early autumn.

For this, she thanks God.

"I thank him for putting me through everything that he has because I think that's what makes me a stronger person for myself and for my kids," she says. "I think just going through what I've gone through means that I can overcome anything."

Nine months ago, Ms. Miller, a single mother of two, lived in a townhouse with her children outside the nation's capital, in suburban Virginia.

Then she wrecked her car and lost her job. Debts mounted from spending so much money she didn't have, and her credit rating plunged.

The family arrived at Sarah's House in January and ended up in a single room set aside for up to 12 weeks of emergency shelter.

But in April, Ms. Miller failed to meet requirements to get into a transitional housing apartment, which Sarah's House provides for families for up to 18 months, because she had not been working or saving money. (To get into transitional housing, applicants must have a steady job and at least two paychecks.)

So she and her two children crammed into an Odenton townhouse with five relatives –

her mother, her sister and her sister's three children.

The next month, Ms. Miller and her children moved back into a room at Sarah's House.

Then, something had happened between April and July, when she moved back into a transitional housing apartment: At 27, Ms. Miller says, she grew up and learned lessons like how to live within her means.

"I was depressed," she says. "It's hard to realize your kids have to move to a shelter, you know. It took a lot for me to be like, 'OK, I can't do it anymore.' I need to come here."

This time, she heeded the advice of Sarah's House staffers, and she got into transitional housing.

Now, she says, she'll never think of homeless people quite the same.

"No one knows what brings somebody here," she says. "It's like no one knows. Rich people can end up homeless. It's wrong for people to stereotype."

She looks at her two children – Angenette, 8, and Elijah, 2 – and tears stream from her brilliant green eyes.

The children hug her.

"It's OK, Mom; it's OK, Mom," says Elijah.

"Mommy, don't cry," says Angenette.

A smile lights up the mother's face.

Sarah's House, she says, has provided much more than a place to eat and sleep. Here, she's gone to parenting classes, workshops, employment programs and counseling. Her case worker helps her set priorities and balance her budget. Her children play with their newfound friends at daycare.

Transitional housing helps residents – Sarah's House prefers to call them "guests" – live independently while strengthening their families.

Now, a Sarah's House bus transports Ms. Miller and her children to and from church and takes her to the grocery store and to her job as a telephone representative for a Glen Burnie company that does surveys of addicts and mentally ill people.

She plans to get certification to become a phlebotomist and attend college.

Not maybe, not someday, but definitely, and soon.

She owes it to her kids, she says, and to herself.