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Jolene, 32, said she and her five children found a safe place to land at Freedom House when she fled a domestic violence situation. Josh Staloch Photo

## Disregarded

# Life in a shelter

## More than a roof and a bed

"I want to be stable for my kids."

BY HEATHER GRAVES EDITOR

BROWN COUNTY - Walking out the door of her Menasha home in 2021, with her five children in tow, Freedom House resident Jolene, 32, said she knew it meant she and her kids - one of whom has a disability requiring her to be in a wheelchair - would be homeless.

"I left an abusive situation with me and my kids," Jolene said as she fought back tears. "It was hard. I won't lie about that. It was quite hard. But, I had enough. I couldn't handle

it anymore, and it was bad for my kids."

Former Freedom House Director Jessica Diederich (who now serves as executive director and CEO with Habitat for Humanity) said no path to living in a shelter is the same.

"Everybody is in a different position when they first get here," Diederich said.

Freedom House is just one of two shelters in the area open to homeless families.

"I think it's important knowing that there are so many different makeups of families," Diederich said. "So, we have people who are fleeing domestic violence - 43% of the

people staying are fleeing domestic violence. So, you have single moms, single dads and then you have couples with children. We have grandparents that have custody of the grandkids. They would qualify to stay here as well. So, it is a very, very large category we are able to serve here."

Diederich said Freedom House works closely with Golden House - a comprehensive domestic violence program serving victims in Brown County.

"They may have somebody who is staying with them that is not in imminent danger anymore, so they are not able to keep

See HOMELESS page 16

## Gerlach works on alderperson orientation manual

BY HEATHER GRAVES EDITOR

GREEN BAY - Coming onboard as the only new Green Bay council member in 2020, District 3 Alderperson Lynn Gerlach admits there was a learning curve.

Since then, Gerlach said she has made it her mission to help others not have the

See GERLACH page 11



Lynn Gerlach

## Crime Stoppers going strong after 35 years

BY JOSH STALOCH STAFF WRITER

GREEN BAY - If you see something, say something.

Facilitating that decades-old advice, Green Bay Area Crime Stoppers (GBACS) has been a piece of the local law

See CRIME STOPPERS page 13

## Public Market coming to Broadway



Submitted Illustration by GRAEF

BY JOSH STALOCH STAFF WRITER

GREEN BAY - The Broadway District in downtown Green Bay is about to get a big upgrade.

The nonprofit, On Broadway, Inc., announced Wednesday, Jan. 26, that a project is in the works to construct a public market in the Old Fort Square building between Dousman

and Hubbard Streets. The project, which is more than five years in the making, will bring 20 new businesses to Broadway by

See BROADWAY page 15

## Local dentist gives back after diagnosis of his own

BY HEATHER GRAVES EDITOR

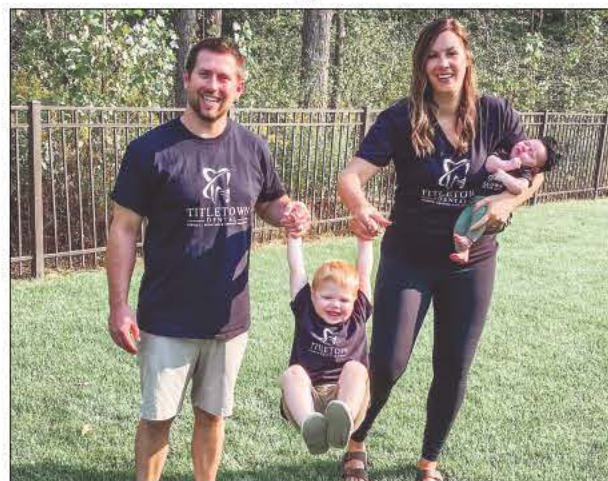
ASHWAUBENON - Dr. Samuel Schmidt, owner of Ashwaubenon's newest dental office - Titledown Dental - said he grew up around dentists.

"My dad was actually in finance with a large dental group, Dental Associates, so I grew up around dentists," he said. "Actually, throughout high school, my part-time job was cleaning a dental office in the evenings."

Looks like it stuck.

After graduating from Wauwatosa High School,

See DENTIST page 22



Dr. Sam Schmidt, and wife, Heather, pictured with their son, Dekker, and daughter, Palmer, recently opened Titledown Dental in Ashwaubenon. Schmidt, who was diagnosed with a genetic heart condition in 2020, donates a portion of every new patient exam toward AED purchases.

Submitted Photo



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**HOMELESS**  
from page 1

them at their shelter, but this family is starting over and they still need help, so they can transfer over here and stay and go through our program," she said.

Diederich said the collaboration goes both ways.

"If somebody is fleeing domestic violence and they now find out they are in danger, we can quickly get them over to Golden House where they can get the protection and services they need," she said. "So, we all work really well together."

Jolene said she found Freedom House – which she described as a safe place to land – through her daughter's social worker.

"I'm thankful I found (Freedom House), it's helped a lot," she said.

Jolene said thanks to the counseling she, and her children, have been receiving through Freedom House, she is starting to piece back together a shattered life.

"I see (my counselor) once a week, and she's helped out quite a bit," she said. "She's helped me resolve some of my issues. I still have plenty to work through, but she's really nice."

Diederich said many residents are in need of more mental health services than ever before.

"A majority of the fami-



Being on his own since he was 14 years old, St. John's resident Eric said finding emotional support has always been a struggle for him. **Josh Staloch Photo**

lies that are staying with us are in some sort of counseling that we are able to partner with other agencies and provide to them at no charge here onsite," she said.

Diederich said resources and services are taking a lot longer to obtain than they have in the past – partially because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which in turn has residents staying longer than they have been.

"When you come into shelter, we help you come up with a plan on what you are going to need, step-by-step, week-by-week," she said.

"That includes things like – if you don't have your Social Security card, well you need that in order to apply for housing assistance and all of these other programs. Before you could just go down to the Social Security office, now it's closed and it takes a month

to get. So, that slows their entire process down when they are staying with us, because that is just another barrier they are going to have to deal with – because you can't get the services you need until you have all proper documentation – birth certificates for the kids and all of those things are taking longer to get. So it's been interesting in serving families in that different way."

In past years, Diederich said on average families would stay at Freedom House between 8-12 weeks.

"Now, some folks are here for 4-5 months because they have so many barriers," she said. "We aren't going to ask them to leave. We just have to continue to work with them, and be more patient."

For her kids – ranging in age from 2 to 13 – Jolene said the move has been

hard, but the safe, stable living environment Freedom House offers has made the transition easier.

"They don't like being crammed into one room, but they're doing good," she said as she played trains with her 2-year-old son.

Jolene said living at Freedom House has given her the opportunity to breathe, take a step back, and know she and her kids are safe as she takes the time to get back on her feet and build a strong foundation for a new life.

"This is a good place to be," she said. "I did try working it out with my ex, but he didn't change."

She said the support classes – such as financial wellness and rent smart – provided her with the tools she needs to make that transition to self-sufficiency.

"As much as I love this place, and appreciate them

helping me," she said. "I really, really would like to be in my own space with my kids. I want stability. I want to be stable for my kids. They have never really had that. I just really want to offer my kids stability, and with a place they can call home."

**St. John's Homeless Shelter**

Living in a shelter is the last place St. John's resident Eric said he ever thought he'd end up.

However, he said it's a lifestyle he's lived off-and-on for the last two-and-a-half years.

"I had an ex-girlfriend who decided she was going to quit her job and use all of the rent money on drugs," Eric said. "We were arguing about it one day and she decided she was going to call the police, said she feared for her life, that I was suicidal. The police came and

Bend to Fond du Lac to New York and now Green Bay.

"No one would help," he said.

Originally from Menomonee Falls, Eric said it wasn't until he found himself in Green Bay that things started to move in a positive direction for him.

He said the helping hand he's received from St. John's is like none he's ever experienced.

"I came here (to St. John's) and probably in three or four days, I was already starting to get the ball rolling. Now, I have a job. They provided me with the resources that I needed to get back on track, and just someone to listen. That means a lot."

Eric said being on his own since he was 14 years old, finding emotional support has always been a struggle for him.

"I've always kind of been the black sheep," he said

**“We always operate at well over capacity with off-site overflow. It's just a matter of how quickly you reach that threshold.”**

**- Lexie Wood**

took me away. I sat in jail for a little while. When I got out, I came home to her being gone and nothing. She got rid of everything."

Shortly after, Eric said he lost both of his parents.

"That's where my journey began," he said. "It's been a struggle ever since."

From there, he said he spent the next couple years jumping from place to place and one from friend's couch to the next – from West

as his voice cracked. "It seems that I've always been a magnet for toxic people. I don't necessarily want to be around them, but they just converge on me like I'm a magnet or something. I tend to wear my heart on my sleeve and get taken advantage of."

St. John's Executive Director Lexie Wood said Eric's story is much like

See HOMELESS page 17



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**HOMELESS**  
from page 16

those of the many others who come to the shelter for support.

"We are really trying to reframe that negative stigma associated with homelessness and really humanize it," she said.

Wood said at its core, the mission of St. John's is to ensure nobody is on the streets due to eligibility or capacity constraints in the harsh winter elements.

As the area's last-resort shelter, she said it is always hovering around building capacity - 84 guests.

"We always operate at well over capacity with off-site overflow," she said. "It's just a matter of how quickly you reach that threshold."

St. John's also supports two daytime resource centers - The Micah House, geared toward men currently experiencing homelessness, or at-risk for homelessness, and Well-spring, specifically target-

According to 2020-21 data from the Brown County McKinney-Vento Program, **more than 1,000 students** (in grades 4K-12) are classified as homeless in Brown County.

**SEPARATED BY DISTRICT:**

- Ashwaubenon - 68 students
- Denmark - 17 students
- De Pere - 30 students
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- Howard-Suamico - 45 students
- Luxemburg-Casco - 5 students
- Pulaski - 11 students
- West De Pere - 61 students
- Wrightstown - 2 students

ing homeless or at-risk women.

**New Community Shelter**

Otis, a longtime volunteer and former resident, said the amount of personal strength it took for him to walk through the doors at New Community Shelter - a year-round shelter open to homeless adult men and women - is nearly inde-

scribable.

"When you walk through those doors," Otis said, pausing briefly before he could continue, "and you don't have anywhere else to go... everybody (comes) through those doors for different reasons."

He said he used to be addicted to cocaine.

"I had good people in my life, but the addiction keeps you away from good

people," he said. "Over the years of abuse, my kids' mother finally said 'Enough is enough,' and I became homeless. When I got here... what I wanted to do was have a place and be responsible for myself."

Otis, now 53, said all his case manager did was point him in the direction to make that happen.

"All he said was 'This is what you need to do to get there,'" he said. "Well, how am I going to get there? These people gave me a bus pass. How am I going to budget? 'We got classes.' I didn't even know too much about computers - well, they have a computer room here. So, it's like everything that they told me I needed to do, to get where I needed to get, they also supplied. It was up to me to want it."

Otis said he's been sober for 10 years.

"I've got 10 more to go," he said. "Then I'm going to get 10 more."

Otis said what New Community Shelter gave to him in the three months he was a resident is why he's continued to volunteer all these years later.

"This Otis, right here, is a proud man now," he said. "I'm more honest, more devoted. I'm a better father for that, better for my grandkids. But without that old Otis, I wouldn't be the person that I am now."

He said he knows how scary it was to come through those doors that first night, and he hopes his successes can help inspire others.

"Not everybody is an addict," he said. "Some people just want a chance to start

over, and everybody deserves a chance."

Chief Executive Officer Terri Refsguard said New Community Shelter is a 24/7-staffed program serving 98 individuals in a dorm-style emergency shelter, as well as 20 single-occupancy, transitional living apartments.

Refsguard said the driving force behind the work New Community does is helping its residents get back on their feet, and once again be self-sufficient.

"(Each guest) is assigned a case manager, and that case manager is theirs for

thing as little as a pair of black shoes, or black pants for work."

Refsguard said, for her, it's exciting to see guests meet their goals.

"It may sound goofy, but it is more exciting for me to see people make the small day-to-day, you know 'I applied for a job today,'" she said. "You know, it isn't 'I got the job, and I'm moving out.' But just to see how happy they are, almost impressed with themselves (for the little things). It's good to see their self-esteem building while they are here."

**“For our minors, all we are is a safe place for them to land. That is all we are allowed to be right now. Other people make the decisions about where they go when they leave here. We don't get to be a part of that”**  
- Beth Hudak

**House of Hope**

For more than two decades, House of Hope has provided safety, stability and self-sufficiency to youth and their children experiencing homelessness.

That mission extended to homeless, unaccompanied minors more recently with the Hope Center - shelter and programming geared toward supporting unaccompanied, homeless youth ages 0-17.

"House of Hope at its core mission is serving youth experiencing homelessness," Executive Director Shannon Wienandt said. "And that is what we are good at. That is what we know how to do best."

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After staying at New Community Shelter for just three months, 10 years ago, 53-year-old Otis has continued to volunteer to help others in similar situations he found himself in to get back on their feet.

Josh Staloch Photo

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**HOMELESS**  
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Whether it's a family with children, a youth on their own or a parenting youth, that's really where we focus."

Wienandt said House of Hope isn't just a shelter.

"We provide supportive housing and resources for hundreds of people each year, not just in the shelter, but people in their own apartments, as well" she said. "We really believe in a housing-first approach, and the way we accomplish that for people is we make sure we are finding the best fit for them."

Beth Hudak, director of Community Engagement for House of Hope, said because of state laws, the approach taken with unaccompanied, homeless youth is often accelerated because they are only able to house these individuals for 20 days.

"What can you do in 20 days?" Hudak said.

Wienandt said their hands are tied because it's a state law.

"For our minors, all we are is a safe place for them to land," she said. "That is all we are allowed to be right now. Other people make the decisions about where they go when they leave here. We don't get to be a part of that."

Hudak said that can be frustrating, and House of Hope tries to make the best of it.

"If we have a 12-year-old in shelter who is on her own, because her parents don't want to go to shelter, and are struggling with homelessness, then we'll help those parents get housing if we can," she said, "by doing all we can to connect parents to resources,



Freedom House, located on Green Bay's far east side, provides shelter, three meals a day, clothing, classes, basic necessities and case management support to families experiencing homelessness. **Josh Staloch Photo**

while providing safe support for the minors in our care."

Hudak said the Hope Center was licensed as a shelter-care facility in December 2020, and began accepting youth in February 2021.

Between July 2019 and June 2020, House of Hope provided emergency shelter and supportive services to 739 individuals in 287 households: 318 adults and 421 children.

"We started serving 17-year-old youth in December 2019, through newly-passed state law," Wienandt said.

According to 2020-21 data from the Brown County McKinney-Vento Program, more than 1,000 students (in grades 4k-12) are classified as homeless in Brown County.

Separated by district, as of June 2021, they include:

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- Denmark – 17 students
- De Pere – 30 students
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- Wrightstown – 2 student

"It's important that we focus on Brown County as a whole, and not just Green Bay, because rural homelessness is just as prevalent," Hudak said. "And for youth, it's even more detrimental, because for the young people we serve, they are in, as adolescents, the second-most important developmental stage of their lives, often raising little people in the single-most important stage of development of their lives, in this incredibly, sort of stressful, toxic, chaotic situation that they really don't have a lot of control over. So, it's really important to also look at how youth development, brain development and all of that can be affected."

Hudak said House of Hope sees children as well as parents with developmental delays.

"People who aren't getting support can't be expected to

pull themselves up by their bootstraps, if they don't even have boots," she said.

**Safe Shelter/Safe Place Parking**

Safe Shelter, 2155 Hutson Rd. on Green Bay's far west side, is the area's newest homeless shelter.

With 14 family rooms of various sizes, Safe Shelter provides families or single adults experiencing homelessness a clean, safe place to live.

Brenda John with Wise Women Gathering Place (WWGP) said it supported Safe Shelter's Director Pearl Webster's vision to open a shelter on the Oneida Nation Reservation from the start.

"WWGP saw the need yearly as 40-60 families applied to our Transitional Living Program each year since 2007, but we could only support 3-6 families at a time," John said. "We have had families that searched nine months to find a landlord who would lease to them, knowing we would provide

rent and utilities for up to two years with supportive services."

Safe Shelter is focused on getting Native families off the street, but all those experiencing homelessness are welcome.

"Of the homeless families in Green Bay, 36% are Native American – less than 3% of this area's population is Native American," John said. "The disparity is clear."

John said Safe Shelter is different from other local shelters because it supports non-traditional families (unmarried couples, mom/grandma/children, etc.), provides Native American programming and offers larger room sizes for families up to nine members.

WWGP also supports the Safe Place Parking Program, which provides people who live in their cars a safe location to park.

The program, which opened in June 2020 in response to the pandemic, opens at 5:30 p.m. and provides an onsite safety monitor, portable toilets and washing stations.

"During our 23 years of operation, WWGP has worked with the 'hidden homeless,' people couch-surfing from place to place, staying with friends and family for two weeks at a time," John said. "Their children may need to stay at another person's home. The pandemic made that practice very dangerous for the homeless person and host alike."

John said on average, 18-20 cars, housing around 30 people, use the Safe Place Parking Program each night. "We work with other agencies, organizations and busi-

**NEXT WEEK:**  
Disregarded: A look toward the future. This two-part finale piece takes a deep dive into what is happening now, what's planned in the future, what should be explored more and includes effective ways for the community to help the homeless population.

**DISREGARDED: THE VIDEO**  
In partnership with the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, the educational partner of the NEW News Lab, The Press Times compiled a supporting short video to accompany the series' written pieces. Visit [gopresstimes.com](http://gopresstimes.com) to view this impactful piece.

nesses in the area to connect them to permanent housing resources, basic needs, food, gas and sometimes car repair as funding allows," John said.

The lot closes at 10 p.m. and parkers must register with WWGP staff, at (920) 883-7202, to use it.

"The safe parking program is often where people go until a spot at a shelter opens up, or their rental unit is available or another source for housing is found," John said.

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