

## **A Place to Call Home**

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Cristina Rodriguez jumped, danced and twirled across the yard in front of her mother's house recently, swinging her arms back and forth and occasionally yelling, "Happy birthday."

Her birthday isn't actually for another few weeks, but for now, it's all she can talk about. Cristina, 3-½ going on 4, tells everyone who asks that she's 4, counting each year on her tiny fingers.

If anyone in Maple Valley saw Cristina from the street, they would see an exuberant child, entrenched in childhood silliness, spinning in front of average-looking duplexes that also boast a playground and a large grassy area.

But for Colleen Starr, who helped found the transitional-housing complex Vine Maple Place, where Cristina and her mother live, the child represents success.

Cristina is clothed. She is fed. She is happy. She is not thinking about where her next meal is or where she will sleep that night. Her 24-year-old mother, Sandra Bergquist, is starting classes at Renton Technical College. When she graduates, she expects to make \$18 an hour in a construction job, compared with previous jobs that paid about \$8.50 an hour.

"They've helped me to calm down here," said Bergquist, who moved into Vine Maple Place about a month ago. "This is the first apartment I've had on my own."

Vine Maple Place, a tiny nonprofit organization with a giant mission, was founded seven years ago by nine Christian churches in Maple Valley that wanted to take part in wiping out homelessness.

The churches raised \$90,000 in seven weeks from their congregations to put a down payment on the four duplexes that are hidden in a nondescript neighborhood off Maple Valley Highway.

Since then, Vine Maple Place has provided transitional housing for more than 100 single mothers and their children, some of whom were previously living in tents in the nearby woods or in old vans by the side of the highway.

The organization, with an annual operating budget of about \$500,000, strives to get mothers on their feet by providing life-skills training — financial planning, cooking classes and child-care advice.

While Vine Maple Place is a Christian organization, there are no religious requirements to live there.

Residents pay 30 percent of their income to the program — if they don't have a job, they pay nothing. The ultimate goal is to get them educated, get them jobs and get them on their feet, said Starr, who runs the organization with her husband, Ron, and six other employees.

Vine Maple Place doesn't provide child care but a child advocate oversees the health and safety of the children who live there.

"Many of these families have no hope," Colleen Starr said. "They don't see a way out."

Over the past two years, the organization has been working to renovate three additional duplexes nearby, adding six more units to the amount of transitional housing it has available.

The rundown complex, called Vine Maple Gardens, was remodeled and decorated by volunteers.

In 2006, hundreds of volunteers donated about 11,000 hours, the Starrs estimate.

The group held a grand opening Sept. 14-15 for Vine Maple Gardens and expects residents to move in by October.

"So many hands have touched this place," said Ron Starr, a former Boeing employee.

The Starrs, who have no children, left high-paying jobs to help found Vine Maple Place. Neither earns a salary there. They live off their investments and retirement income.

Of course, the group says it could easily use 100 more units.

During one night's count in January this year, 2,159 people were found surviving outside without shelter in parts of Seattle and King County, according to the Seattle/King County Coalition for the Homeless.

The problem is especially challenging in Maple Valley, where there aren't many shelters or transportation resources and services such as grocery stores are few and far between, Colleen Starr said.

One of the biggest challenges for the nonprofit is finding residents affordable, permanent housing once they're finished living at Vine Maple Place. The average

apartment in nearby Renton costs \$934 a month, an 8.5 percent increase from last year, according to Seattle-based Cain Inc., which tracks apartment rents in King and Snohomish counties.

Last year, Vine Maple Place turned away 700 mothers and children looking for transitional housing.

"So many of these people have so many issues," Colleen Starr said. "They come in here with so much baggage."

Hopefully, they'll leave a little lighter.

Bergquist, whose husband is in jail, said her goal is to get an education and be able to manage on her own.

When she gets stressed out about anything, she can pop into the nonprofit's office next door to her house and chat with her case manager.

"We're all going through the same thing at the same time here," she said.

While food isn't provided at Vine Maple Place, the organization periodically checks residents' refrigerators to make sure there's enough to feed their kids.

Outside on the lawn, Cristina stopped spinning long enough to grab a big bag of Cheetos. Between smiles, she happily crammed handfuls of them into her mouth.

"It's my birthday party!" said Cristina and blew Cheetos-scented kisses into the wind.