



Sharon Cantillon/Buffalo News

Susan Phister left, with daughters 21-month-old Paige Pelowski and 7-year-old Brooke Yale, has lived in Gerard Place for eight months. Victoria Jones, with sons 23-month-old Daniel Jones and 9-month-old Dumar Davis, has lived there for two years

Gerard Place widens mission with education center

By Emma D. Sapong
News Staff Reporter

Updated: September 19, 2009, 2:39 PM

During the decade Susan Phister grappled with substance abuse, she was often incarcerated, and lost custody of her daughter.

"I had extreme legal problems," the 44-year-old Depew native said. "I was in and out of jail or just out on the streets. I didn't know how to live a normal life — how to keep a home, how to raise a family."

Phister is now sober and getting the hang of leading that normal life with the help of Gerard Place, a transitional housing for single-parent, homeless families. She landed an internship with Drug Court and now is raising her two children in a two-bedroom apartment at Gerard Place, formerly St. Gerard School.

The residence on Bailey Avenue also offers supportive services and programs to curb substance abuse, trains its tenants in job readiness, computer skills, parenting and other classes geared toward their eventual self-sufficiency.

"Without their support and understanding, I would never be able to provide a home and stability for my family," Phister said. "We had nowhere to go and we had nothing."

Phister is already one of many Gerard Place success stories, and she's been there only eight months. Ninety percent of residents who graduate from the program remain in permanent housing.

Gerard's model of comprehensively addressing a body of problems that stymie independence will be put to work in the blighted community that surrounds it. Last year, the organization received a \$225,000 grant from the Junior League of Buffalo and The Buffalo News. The money, with funding from other sources, was used to renovate the convent and former church next to Gerard Place and now it is The Junior League of Buffalo/The Buffalo News Education Center.

"They'll be able to learn skills here that will hopefully improve their lives," said David Zapfel, executive director of Gerard Place. "And they'll be able to come and learn in a safe and secured building."

Zapfel said planning for the new education center began a couple of years ago with the mission of aiding a community with high crime and high unemployment rates.

"We were experiencing success with our families at Gerard Place, but we saw the neighborhood had major problems," Zapfel said. "So we decided to apply the model to the community."

And that will be done in the form of a multitude of programs and services geared to all ages — from "Focus on Youth" to "10 Warning Signs of Alzheimer's disease." The newly renovated building features a new handicap ramp and lively colored conference, kitchen, computer training and life skills rooms.

Before the offerings were confirmed, Gerard Place staff surveyed members of the community at the library and drug store to decide which classes and programs to offer. GED, job readiness, computer training and parenting topped the list and are among the classes. Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings will also be extended to the neighborhood. There will be after-school programs and classes on nutrition, relationships, personal finance at the center.

For the first time in many years that community will have Girl Scouts and Boy Scouts troops and it will be based at the center. Gerard Place tenants will be the volunteers, including Phister, with the troops.

"It will be an opportunity for me to bond with my daughter who will be a Girl Scout," said Phister, who has 7-year-old and 2-year-old daughters. "I'm re-establishing my relationship with her as a parent, so this will help."

Phister and other residents said they are excited that community members will get to benefit from Gerard Place's line-up for life-changing programs. Also, it'll be the first time the residents at Gerard Place interact with people in the neighborhood.

Victoria Jones, who has two sons and lives at Gerard Place, said: "It's just wonderful, I think we'll have a better community because of education that is being offered. I'm looking forward to taking more classes. I'll probably be taking everything. It's good to take advantage of all that's here."