

# The District Weekly

July 30, 2008 / Volume 2 Issue 17

## Homelessness-less

By Dave Wielenga, Senior Editor

It's a rush-hour Friday morning on Long Beach's West side, and April and Denisha are hurrying their two little children toward a drab building – beige prefab and terra-cotta brick, brightened a little by a green sash of lawn that sits on the edge of a seen-better-days industrial park. The women are dropping off 4-year-old Jaden and 1-year-old Erin at day care.

The kids are April's, although that's become a technicality – Denisha's been just as much a parent throughout their young lives. The women met several years ago as next-door neighbors. They became the kind of friends who turned to one another when times got bad – most crucially, when April's relationship with the children's father went south – until their mutual support turned into something more, something enough in itself to turn the bad times good.

About a year ago, however, time – both good and bad – suddenly seemed to stop completely for them. It was as though they were in another world. That sensation – of being sort of frozen and floating, everything unfamiliar – is very common among the people who come to this nondescript complex called the Long Beach Multi-Service Center, where 16 agencies provide help to people who are homeless or on the verge of it. The feeling of suspension is intensified by the fact that the facility is practically parked on the shoulder of the Long Beach Freeway – not even a chain-link fence in between – where the traffic roars out a reminder that the rest of the world they knew continues to turn without them.

A few weeks ago, 26-year-old April and 22-year old Denisha talked about how that happens, how it feels and how they are working toward better days for themselves and their children.

**April:** The beginning of homelessness? We were living in Bellflower. Denisha was in school and I was working full time as a manager at a grocery warehouse. And when I say 'full time,' I mean I worked almost 12 hours a day, one day off a week. I was able to pay all the bills, car note, everything. But the company wasn't doing so well. They ended up closing all the stores, short notice. I was out of a job.

No matter how many times she says it, that last sentence drops with the same weight as it did on July 24, 2007, when April came home from work and told Denisha it had been her last day. Hearing it again, the women reflexively look at one another to see if the other has felt the impact. And it's the collision of their glances that almost knocks them off emotional balance. April takes a steadying breath before she continues. Denisha, holding the air inside her chest, listens intently, poised as if ready to spring forward and catch her partner if she falters.

**April:** We lost the apartment on Sept. 13. It was really difficult to secure another job that was going to take care of all the bills like the other job did. Because it paid really well-with overtime, close to \$3,600 per month. To prevent us from being evicted, I went ahead and put in a 30-day notice in hopes that maybe we could stay with a relative or someone. Unfortunately, we couldn't, so we ended up in hotels. But the clean ones cost between \$300 and \$400 per week. We tried living at her mother's house. Things didn't work out there.

That's when I said I don't have anywhere else to turn – I'm going to try to find ourselves a shelter. It was hard getting in. There are waiting lists, and they want referrals.

**Denisha:** Everyone's so pressured that they seem mean. And then when we show up, and they see April and me, they're really judgmental.

**April:** Pretty soon we were back in a hotel, using up our last little bit of money.

Meanwhile, the children. Although the sudden insecurity of the family's nomadic existence was steadily becoming a new kind of normalcy, it became clear that simply becoming accustomed to this way of life wasn't the same as becoming well-adjusted to it.

**April:** Jaden couldn't talk!

**Denisha:** He couldn't talk...he would try to talk, but you couldn't really understand what he was saying. He was three and a half. But he hadn't been around any other kids. It was just him. I kinda felt like a failure because I was the one who was mostly at home with him.

**April:** We could understand him.

**Denisha:** We could understand him, because we're used to it. But people were like, 'What is he saying?' We're like, 'Oh, he's saying this.'

**April:** And Erin, she was eight months old and she wasn't even crawling yet.

**Denisha:** We thought she was behind.

**April:** But because we were in shelters, we couldn't put her on the ground or on the floor. It's really dirty. So she didn't have the opportunity or the stimulation.

Finally, deep into October, temperatures dropping and their own hopes fading, the women cast their fate into a Google search engine.

**April:** It just so happened that the Long Beach Multi-Service Center popped up. I'd never heard of it. I gave them a call and said: 'I need help, I'm homeless, living in a car really soon. What do I need to do?' The person who answered the phone said: 'Okay, I need you guys to come down and bring all of your documentation, and we'll get you set up with a social worker and go from

there.' The very next morning we came early, the kids in the car. We met up with Alex. She was our social worker-the nicest person in the world.

**Denisha:** I love Alex.

**April:** From the first time walking in here, things were better. Alex took us, asked us some questions-how we go homeless, income, things like that-and had us fill out a couple papers and forms and things. I would say within a week and a half she put us in Catholic Charities, a 30-day emergency shelter.

**Denisha:** And she put in our request for the Play House.

There are two so-called play houses, the touchy-feely nickname for the state-of-the-art day care facilities operated by Children Today-one of the 16 agencies headquartered in the Multi-Service Center. Like the other organizations there, Children Today helps unparalyze the lives of Long Beach's homeless. It's not the real world, but it offers a map back to it.

Still, it's often impossible for homeless parents to do the work it takes to regain jobs and living spaces with their children tagging along. Children Today solves that dilemma for the parents of 64 children, who can safely leave their kids with the accredited personnel at the Play Houses.

Of course, those are just 64 drops in an overflowing bucket. City surveys estimate that there are some 700 homeless children in Long Beach out of a total homeless population of approximately 4,475.

April and Denisha's toddler, Jaden, was admitted within a week; the waiting list for Erin, the infant, was a few weeks more. But the most traumatic part of the experience came on the first day, when the women brought their children to the Play House and tried to walk away.

**April:** Gosh, it was *hard*. Jaden had never been in day care, ever. He's always been home with us. You hear things about, you know, day care centers. A lot of times, um, a lot of times it's negative things.

**Denisha:** It scares you, as a parent. Like, I don't want my child to have a bad experience.

April: But everyone was really nice. They allowed us to stay with Jaden as long as we needed to get him comfortable-or for us to feel comfortable. But then Erin was accepted about two to three weeks later. There was a spot available for her and...oh, my gosh...

April's eyes fill with tears and she pauses until the lump in her throat dissolves, although it returns two or three more times as she continues.

**April:** See, that's my baby...she was only eight months old.

**Denisha:** That was the hardest.

**April:** She can't talk. She can't tell you if something's wrong, so I had to...put my trust in them. Oh, my gosh...I would drop her off, then leave, then feel like coming back. Like, 'Is she okay?' It was really hard. But like I said, we talked to them at the Play House and they made us feel comfortable.

**Denisha:** We felt like we had that relationship with them. And we trusted them to the point where anything that was negative was put in the back of your heads in a week's time.

**April:** Pretty soon we were talking like, 'Maybe it's good! The kids are happy.' You could see it in the way they were acting.

Children Today has a million-dollar annual budget for its two Play Houses-one on the west side, off Anaheim Street, the other in the city's northern reaches, near South Street and Cherry Avenue-and maybe that sounds like a lot of money. If they cut staff and services, maybe they could care for more than 64 children at a time.

"Shouldn't homeless kids be entitled to first-class care?" responds Dora Jacildo, the executive director of Children Today. She is speaking passionately-and, without question, rhetorically. "In fact, don't they need it even more?"

The mission of Children Today is more than providing a warehouse for kids to wait while their homeless parents work on the problems-maybe the loss of a job, the loss of a partner or chemical dependency-that put them on the street. It's a full-service source of healing for the wide variety of often-hidden trauma that might otherwise create lifelong consequences, in the parents and the children.

Children Today is an accredited child-care facility-only eight percent of the child-care places in the entire country can say that-with a one-to-four ratio of caregivers to kids. That's expensive, Jacildo acknowledges. But that's worth it, she insists.

"So often, not-for-profits are the poor serving the poor, and the services reflect that," Jacildo says. "God bless all of them, because all possible help is needed. But we're very aggressive in grant-writing and fundraising because we believe the services we offer our poor clients should be as good as most people with money can afford. We think our services *are* as good.

"They're better," chips in Josh Lowenthal-yes, one of *those* Lowenthals-who heads the Children Today board of directors and spearheads fundraising. He gently chides Jacildo for her modesty. "You shouldn't feel bad about saying they're better."

**Denisha:** The changes in our children were dramatic.

**April:** As soon as we could put Erin down in a clean and safe place, she started crawling!

**Denisha:** Not for very long, though. She crawled for exactly a week before she started standing up and taking steps.

**April:** She was standing up and walking: It's like she totally skipped crawling. It was crazy!

**Denisha:** And Jaden began to speak better. People will tell you now that he speaks clearly.

**April:** He can hold a conversation with you; he's never been able to do that. He couldn't even give you eye contact. His self-esteem was, like, really low.

**Denisha:** Really low. Because the homeless situation was really hard on him. And we didn't realize how much it had affected him until we got here.

**April:** Around other kids.

**Denisha:** He was taking his anger out on other kids. He was distant. He didn't want to interact with the other kids. He was always by himself. We got a chance to talk to the clinical social worker here, Lisa, and she gave us little handouts and manuals and books to read to help us help him cope. She gave us books on shelters and homelessness to help him understand. It helped.

**April:** They crying was down to a minimum. The tantrums were getting lower. He was feeling more stable and secure. He'll say 'excuse.' He'll say 'thank you.' He's more loving. He will come up to me out of nowhere and say, 'Mommy, I love you.'

Not that the children's life away from the Play House has been anything like the one they had been living before, when April had a good job and they lived in a nice apartment. In the nine months since finding Children Today, the family has lived in housing provided by four different institutions while waiting for something permanent-and working to be able to afford it when it comes. Denisha and April have both been working and going to school part-time. That kind of commitment is a requirement for parents who receive the services of Children Today.

"If you don't strengthen the parent," reasons Jacildo, "you haven't done the child any good."

But getting stronger isn't without its additional stresses, and April and Denisha have frequently felt overwhelmed-and showed it. Their children couldn't help but notice-and show it, too.

**Denisha:** Lisa sat down and talked to us, about our problems and how we felt, and she explained that the way we were reacting to certain things could rub off on the children-that they could see it. We weren't aware the kids understood what we were going through. She really opened up our eyes to that.

**April:** It hurts me to know that my children were picking up on my fears.

**Denisha:** Lisa told us, 'It's okay to let it out, but if the kids see you hurting or crying, they're going to know that something's wrong and it's going to concern them.' So a lot of times, when we feel we need a breakdown or a cry or whatever, we do it in a closet or a bathroom, where the kids can't see it.

**April:** The things we have learned haven't made our problems go away. But we really feel like we aren't doing this alone. When you have no one to talk to, no one to turn to, no one to help you-it's like the end of the world. Then suddenly you have these people who are just here with open arms-you don't know them, they don't know you, but they're genuine. They're willing to do whatever it takes to make you feel better and for you to get back to where you need to be. It was ready to give up. I did not know what to do. They just paved that path for me, from October until now-when we're getting ready to be in our own place again.

If the paperwork is processed as expected, April and Denisha should be living in a small townhouse by the middle of August-13 months after the grocery warehouse job evaporated, taking their home and hopes with it. For now, the women have part-time jobs working airport security. They have other plans for the future.

**Denisha:** April is almost finished with her degree at Cerritos College, then she's going on to a four-year school again-she went to Cal State Dominguez Hills for a while before, out of high school. Ask her what she wants to major in there.

**April:** I'm going for early childhood development. The people here inspired me. If I could work somewhere like this or start an organization similar to this, to give back...oh, my gosh, that would mean the world to me.

Although April and Denisha grew up in Long Beach, not many people know that they have been homeless for the past year. They realize that may change when this story appears.

**April:** I haven't said anything for fear that I'm letting my family down, not setting a good example for the younger kids in my family-I'm the oldest grandchild, and I've always felt I have to set the highest standard.

**Denisha:** But a lot has happened to us, and the experience has made us look at things differently. It has opened our minds.

**April:** I'm sure people who know us will be shocked to learn that we've been homeless, but that doesn't matter anymore. What I've been through is what makes me who I am right now. This is who I am. For some reason, this is something I have had to go through. If people love me, they're going to love me no matter what.