

# Sharon & Bill MURPHY

## Bringing the Homeless Home

For two decades Sharon and Bill Murphy have been helping the homeless by moving them into their own home and making them part of their family. They have taken literally the Biblical admonition that we are our brother's keeper. As a result they have been blessed with happiness and fulfillment because, in the most personal way possible, they have made the world a little better place in which to live.

It all started thirty years ago when Bill Murphy was two months from graduation from college. Bill came from an affluent family and had dreams of going on to get his MBA and following the family tradition. One fateful night he met a homeless man asking for money with which to buy food. Bill gave him five dollars. This led to a conversation in which Bill's heart went out to the man so much that he invited him to take shelter for the night in his dormitory room at the college. For this Christian act of caring, Bill was expelled from school.

In the end the school gave him his degree, but Bill's life had been changed evermore by the experience. "I decided that I was going to work with the homeless and if that was the



case I should learn for myself what it felt like," Bill remembers. "So I gave away all my possessions, bought a bus ticket, and ended up penniless in Washington, DC. I started knocking on doors until I found a place to sleep that night, which was called the Community for Creative Nonviolence [CCNV]."

Around the same time, Sharon declined a college scholarship in order to follow her dream of helping others. She worked as a nursing assistant in the Midwest and eventually worked her way to Columbia, Maryland, where she began similar work in a hospital. About two months later, she

heard a speech by CCNV founder, Ed Guinan, and something clicked for her. The next day she moved to Washington, DC, and she, too, began working with the organization.

As Bill and Sharon worked together a friendship slowly developed. They discovered that they had common values and the common goal to do something significant with their lives. They were married in 1977 and for several years they volunteered together for various agencies which served the homeless.

"Once we had our own children," Sharon says, "we wondered how we could continue to serve and still raise a family." The Murphys decided the best way to do this would be to bring another needy family into their own home. "The original dream was to have one large house—to have a home and to share space with another family," Bill says.

"We landed by grace into the refugee community of DC. We heard of someone who had a drop-in center in Adams-Morgan and we told him that we



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had a home and we had space for another family. There was not any strategic planning beyond that. The first family he referred to us was from Mexico. They did not speak English and we did not speak Spanish," Sharon says with a chuckle. Despite the obstacles this experience proved to be so wonderful that the Murphys decided to repeat it. And they did so for family after family.

There came a point where the demand became so great and the Murphys wanted to help still more. They decided to broaden their efforts by creating a program augmented by other run-down houses in the neighborhood which they could acquire for the asking and renovate with the help of community volunteers.

The vision was to create a program that really worked with families, however those families were configured—whether it was a single mom who was pregnant or parents with six children. "We would sit down with the family and try to determine their needs. If we thought we could help, we asked them whether they wanted to take the risk and become, in effect, part of our family," says Sharon.

They named their program Mary House and their efforts were blessed with many more families to adopt, most of them from Latin America. The number of their homes has increased from one to ten and the number of families they have joined to their extended family at any one time is now 32. The number of services they provide grew from food and shelter to 15 supportive services. As their efforts received publicity they received a patchwork of donations from private

individuals, public corporations and from government—not much but enough to keep body and soul and extended family together. Today Bill and Sharon have the help of dozens of volunteers who help them care for the 125 people, half of them children, who now live with them.

Bill says their program has been limited to small townhouses intentionally. The families they care for have been fairly isolated he says, because "you cannot build in them a sense of belonging and community if you place them in a building that houses 140 families. But it can take place in a building that houses six."

Mary House today provides a variety of services to its families and to the surrounding community. In addition to free housing for the homeless, they offer low-cost transitional housing for families who are working and who can begin to pay a

small rent. They offer workshops on financial management and act as a "bank" creating a savings program for each family. Mary House offers help with clothing, furniture, job counseling, job placement, supportive prenatal and postnatal care, mothering classes, a library, and a variety of computer training programs. They have also set up a summer camp for children, which stresses academic achievement and tutoring, along with physical activities, sports, and recreation.

"The idea for a summer camp came to us from one of our volunteers four years ago. The way things work around here is that when someone comes up with a good idea we give them all the positive reinforcement that we can and tell them to make it work," says Sharon. The summer camp became a reality for 18 happy children associated with Mary House, and also included a few from the community who wanted to come along.

Simply put, the Murphys and their volunteers do whatever is necessary to see to the well-being of their houseguests. In doing so they help make life better for everyone. "We all go around thinking 'someone should do something' but no one is doing it. You just have to realize that you are somebody and that you can do something one step at a time," says Bill. □

