

Invisible homeless in the suburbs

By Teresa Schmedding | Daily Herald Staff

You don't see them standing on corners rattling cups for change. You don't see them holding up cardboard "Will Work for Food" signs at busy intersections or playing musical instruments on

O'Hare walkways.

They are the thousands of homeless families in the suburbs that shuffle from couch to couch at the homes of friends and relatives, or sleep in cars, shelters, businesses and rundown motels.

They are people like Angela and David Johnson, and their two children - Riley, 7, and Deagan, 5 - a suburban family that, like thousands of others, started off with a bright future but through either bad decisions or circumstances ended up scratching and clawing for day-to-day existence in the cold shadows of homelessness.

Blissful beginning

Angela and David grew up in the suburbs. She was a dance team captain and gold honor roll student at Wheaton North High School. He was the class clown at Lake Park High in Roselle who dreamed of being an artist.

They met as students at the College of DuPage in 2001 and fell in love. They dreamed of buying a loft in Chicago, getting married and building a life together. But things didn't turn out that way.

Instead, Angela and David found themselves thrust into adulthood with an unexpected pregnancy and their dreams turned into chaos with financial hardships, job layoffs and drug addiction.

After a seven-year path of rundown motels and relatives' couches the family of four now lives in an apartment in Glendale Heights, funded by homeless advocate Bridge Communities,

But when they were both 20 and first falling in love, they were blissfully happy - and naive.

"I trained her on the cash register and then asked her out," David says, still laughing and blushing when he recalls the first time he met Angela.

Both had the same quirky sense of humor, interest in the arts and culture, and goals in life. "We both could be silly with each other. We could really talk to each other about anything," Angela says. "That night we had a date and we sat in my car until midnight talking about our future."

That future included dreams of being the first in their families to finish college. Until Angela got pregnant.

The couple wanted to keep the baby, so they dropped out of school and rented a studio apartment in Wheaton. David started working two retail jobs.

"It was tough," Angela says. "We were living paycheck to paycheck, barely supporting ourselves. - (We didn't know anything) about money or grown-up relationships, and in a matter of three months we needed to know both."

Riley was born Feb. 8, 2002, and the couple was thrilled. They got married a month later and started living an "adult" life. They had a second child, Deagan, two years later.

They were walking a financial tight rope, with David's family helping fill in the financial gaps. They moved into a larger apartment in Bloomingdale.

"We were making it at that time," David says. But it wouldn't last.

Dreams dissolve

In March 2004, a month after Deagan was born, the economy started to slow and David was laid off from both jobs. He started working odd construction jobs. They managed to hang on for a few more months, but by summer, the odd jobs dried up and David was laid off again. "His layoff did cause a huge downward spiral, but the problems started before," Angela says.

Growing up in the cocoon of the suburbs, the young couple wasn't prepared to juggle a baby and married life - and the financial obligations of both - while keeping their college dream. They knew nothing about handling money. They didn't know how to save. They didn't know how to

ask for help.

"I don't think there is enough guidance out there for young people who want to keep their baby. We thought he had to work and I had to stay at home," Angela says. "What worked for our parents 20 years ago didn't work (in today's world)."

Angela started working at the YMCA in Glen Ellyn part time for \$7.25 an hour as a child-care coordinator. While the pay was meager, she says, she could take Deagan and Riley to work with her.

Love and a strong work ethic weren't enough to keep their heads above water when the layoffs came and the future looked bleak.

Depressed, afraid, unsure how to fill the traditional role of a breadwinner, David turned to drugs. What started as an outlet for stress quickly became an all-consuming addiction to cocaine and heroin.

"I gave up. I didn't see a way out," David says.

He managed to hide his addiction for a few months, but when Angela found out, she left him and moved in with her father, sharing a bed with her two children in a tiny room for two years. Her father watched Riley and Deagan at night while Angela attended cosmetology school in the hope of someday making enough money to support them.

Angela didn't always know where David was, but they kept in touch through phone calls and would meet so he could spend time with Riley and Deagan.

"I would go to where he was with the kids. He never had them, even for a few hours, by himself," Angela says. "We would hang out for a few hours and then I'd leave and go back to my dad's."

Living at her father's worked for a while, but Angela's family was pressuring her to divorce David, something that, despite everything, she wasn't ready for. It was hard to reconcile the drug addict she saw with that funny, cute boy she fell in love with just six years earlier at COD.

"I didn't feel he was somebody to give up on," Angela says. "I am a Christian, and I knew there was still hope for him."

While she had faith in David, it wasn't blind.

"I was always wondering if what I was feeling was stupid. Was I being ignorant? Was I one of those women who just didn't know he was terrible?" Angela says. "I didn't know if I was making the right decision until he came to me and he was better."

Things seemed to look up in late 2007. Angela had graduated cosmetology school. David was starting to realize what drugs were costing him. But the darkest was yet to come as Angela's faith in David led her to move her children into a rundown motel on Roosevelt Road in Glen Ellyn.

"I made the decision, on my own, to leave my dad's. I knew that they (parents) did not feel I should be waiting for Dave to get clean because they felt he never would," Angela says. "I found it difficult to be a burden on my dad when he felt so strongly about me leaving Dave permanently. My only option, I felt, was a motel. This was not something I was forced to do, it broke my dad's heart that we left. But I knew I needed to start the steps of living independently."

Looking back, Angela sees her options weren't so black and white and the decision to join the "invisible homeless" with no permanent address was her own.

"It became a hopeless situation, and I just felt I had to take care of myself, and I thought if this is how I have to do it, then I have to," she says. "It was horrible, with Band-Aids keeping the wallpaper up. This motel was the saddest thing I've ever seen."

Angela found herself in the same cycle as other homeless families living at the motel who could scrape together the \$375 a week to stay there but couldn't save enough for a deposit on an apartment. After six weeks, Angela knew her time was running out.

She couldn't work, having no one to take care of Riley and Deagan. And the motel was so depressing that she took the kids out almost every night to dinner or the movies, trying to make them feel like they were on an adventure rather than on the verge of collapse. The price of protecting her children from their harsh reality was rapidly eating through what little money she had. She felt she couldn't keep turning to her father, who was still helping out.

Desperate, she turned to the YWCA, which she heard offered low-cost day care, and found a lifeline in a packet of information they gave her on housing assistance programs in DuPage County.

"I called them all," Angela said. "When I called Bridge, I asked 'What is this organization?' and (a woman) explained it to me and I immediately burst into tears."

Glimmers of hope

Bridge Communities, Angela learned, is a Glen Ellyn organization dedicated to helping DuPage County homeless families stop the cycle of poverty by providing housing, financial assistance and career counseling for a two-year period.

The group had a long waiting list - longer than Angela could endure. So she pushed. She offered to work for Bridge, to do anything they wanted, if they could just help her children.

Angela's persistence, along with her education, put her on the fast track at Bridge and she was accepted into the program. She went in the next day for an interview and three months later, in March 2008, she had a place to lay her head at night, a bed to tuck her children into, a chance to learn financial skills, to find a career.

To create hope for their future.

"I love Bridge. It's an amazing, amazing program," Angela says.

David, meanwhile, was trying to get clean, but he was stuck in the all-too-familiar cycle of relapses when feelings of guilt and hopelessness overwhelmed him, finding it easier to stay in the "horrible hole" he was in rather than face reality.

"Addiction made me really fragile and easy to fall back on that crutch," he says.

He slept on couches, on the streets, inside when he could find a warm spot. He spent his days wandering aimlessly in malls to fill the time until his next fix.

Today, David is uncomfortable talking about the things he did while on drugs, but he doesn't shirk responsibility for his mistakes and gets emotional when he talks about how he has hurt the ones he loves. "My mom spent upward of \$10,000 to get me a special rapid detox from heroin," he says. "The second I got my bearings, I stole her car and a bunch of movies (to get high).

"The reason that's so bad is because she took days off work to drive me to Michigan to get the procedure done, she's paying for it and the days up to the procedure ... she took really good care of me, and that's how I repay her," he says. "Granted, I wasn't in full control, but I know that I did that and I'm not proud of it at all."

And he was growing weary of the fight.

"It's a lot of effort to keep it a secret and get money for drugs," he says.

Angela didn't know where David was while he was "floating," often losing track of him for a week or more at a stretch. But at last, he hit rock bottom and had an epiphany one harsh night in 2008 - and he walked away from his drug addiction and toward a life with his family.

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