



Serving children and families
at risk for reoccurring homelessness
through
Early childhood education
Childcare,
Respite care,
Arts programs,
Child development classes,
Family support
and Festival Celebrations

Thanks to the generous care and support of many people we have just completed a truly wonderful first year.

In July of 2001 we completed nine months of renovations to the house, the interns moved in and we began our first year of programs. One year later we are looking back on a year of hard work filled with grace and we are poised to begin the year ahead with every program expanded and full. Our children and families arrive wounded and traumatized from domestic violence, abuse, emotional and mental instability, violent surroundings, cramped living situations and difficult pasts. They struggle daily with fear and poverty. They have all been homeless. We are grateful for all that has been made possible by the support of so many and we wish to share with you a taste of the healing and growth that has taken place.

Daycare

The children arrived each morning between 6:30 and 7:00. After breakfast we begin our day of nursery class based on the Waldorf early childhood work. The children develop and learn through living life together in an environment of beauty, order and harmony. Among many other activities the children play, bake, garden, paint, sing, help with the cooking, listen and are listened to, look at books, dance, paint, draw and help clean up. When outside time is over they wash (in warm water everyday, for some an uncommon comfort and luxury), listen to a story and eat their main meal of the day, a warm nutritious lunch. Then each one goes to their cot, remarkably happy to have their own blanket, the toy they have chosen to sleep with, a book read to them and a cozy nap before the afternoon activities begin.

When one of our 4-year-old boys first came to Sophia House he was a whirlwind of fists, hitting other children many times a day. He has experienced much violence in his short life. But now a whole week can go by without even so much as a push. His face is calm, no longer hard and tight. Still, he will need some time to make this newfound way of being his own. One day while playing with the ducks in the water he looked up and quietly said, "I'm a good boy now." "Yes, you are a good boy." We meet in a smile, it has been a long journey; he goes back to his play, singing softly to himself. Each of the children have their story of finding the safety and nourishment they need to get on with the profound tasks of early childhood.

Before and After School Program

After a good breakfast and a bit of play the school age children (kindergarten through 3) check their backpacks to see that they have everything they need for the day, dress for the weather and walk to school with a co-worker. After school, about 2p.m., a co-worker is waiting to pick them up and listen with interest as the children tell about their day. Then it is snack, homework with tutoring, story or artistic activity and outside play before they are picked up at around 6p.m. Regular attendance, nutritious food, daily help with homework, supported parental participation at school and much needed school supplies has meant improved schoolwork and a more positive school experience. The children feel they are OK, they belong. It has been a struggle to establish a gentle rhythmical daily routine; it is not what they have known. Once established, rhythm brings many rewards, including chaos coming to order.

One child age 7 wrote a story that begins with her walk from Sophia House to school. "The birds fly so happy in the sky and the sky is blue, and the sun is bright. I am on my way to school. I have my backpack my pencils, my homework, my sharpener, my books and my eraser and that is in my backpack..."



Respite Care

Every other weekend children from families needing a break from the stress of their lives come to spend the weekend with us. These are children who are not a part of the daily programs. The children experience the rhythm of dinner at a big table, baths, stories and bedtime. Of course they also enjoy the games, outings and artistic activity. In addition to providing care on a more one-time basis we have several families for whom we provide regular respite care. These are families living with chronic high stress. For these children coming to Sophia House is like an old-fashioned visit to grandmas. They bound up the stairs, choose their bed, find their doll or toy, make sure all their favorite things are still there, check on the growth of the plants they worked with last time in the garden, and settle into a deliciously predictable weekend. As one child remarked with amazement to her friends, “at Sophia House everyone always waits with you at dinner until you are finished.”

One night after dinner Jamie sighs, “you are never going to move, right?” Jamie needs sustained relationships so that she can grow into the glorious person she, and every child, has the potential to be. She needs this touchstone in an otherwise chaotic life.

Family Support

Sophia House and Raphael House work collaboratively in all the programs serving the children and families. It is in family support that the unique effectiveness of this collaboration is perhaps most clearly observable. Family support covers many aspects of life; effective family support takes place within a genuine human relationship. Our daily contact with the mothers and children provides the opportunity to build sustainable healing relationships that can address both the outer needs resulting from poverty and also begin to heal the inner poverty, which is so disabling for our families. Inner poverty, a lack of inner resources, results from a lack of community and of relationship, a lack of soul enriching experiences and of experiences in nature and art, a lack of self-esteem and inner order and an inability to honor what is whole and good in themselves and in others. An important part of our work is to build up and fill this self-image through genuine relationship, experience and skill building. One essential way in which we do this is through our lives together, through living with an awareness of the importance of ennobling everyday life. Through seeing each person in his or her wholeness we are able to have an inspiring picture of what each of us, every child and adult, can be. We are able to work together toward becoming whole.

One mother of children in the daycare program worked hard and passed her state exam to become a certified nursing assistant.

She feels very good about her accomplishment and can now find much better paid work. This was possible because Raphael House offered her transportation costs, book fees and support for her family while she took her required courses. At Sophia House we tutored her three times a week, accompanied her struggle, offered encouragement and a firm belief that she could do it, even in English, her second language. One evening as we were studying and her children were being cared for downstairs long after everyone had left, this mother looked up and said, “everyone is helping, we do it together.” She was suddenly struck by what it can mean to be a community. We all rejoiced together when she passed her exam.

Internship Program

The work of Sophia Project depends upon the interns who live and work at Sophia House for six months to a year. Interns serve as co-workers in all aspects of the program. They engage in a life of direct service, supervised training and study, reflection, artistic work and community life. We are deeply grateful for their gifts and dedication. Interns for the past year have been Paul Bradley, Erin Desmond, Silene Gemmrich, and Anna Klauder. Eric Beumer, an experienced and very capable co-worker from Camphill Orion in Holland also joined us. Orion generously sponsored Eric for three months to assist us in establishing this new community. We were also joined by student teachers doing their practicum work. The coming year interns include Paul Bradley, Isabelle McDaniel, Nils Richter, and Anna Sands.

We have an ongoing need for people interested in serving in this capacity.



The Neighborhood

From the very beginning the neighborhood children have been a part of Sophia Project. They come to play inside and outside on weekends and on as many evenings as we have the strength to watch them and play with them. They love to pick a small bunch of flowers from the garden, learn to make a puppet, paint or just play with the “cool” toys.

One day the eight-year-old boy who lives next door was on our step. “My mom told me to come over here to be safe,” he said. We went next door to see what was happening. No one was home so we returned to our house. Hours later he saw his dad walking down the street and he ran to him. His dad listened to his son, looked up at us, and gave us a world-weary wave. The child’s mother has not returned. Understandably the child does not smile very often. So it is great to see him beaming when he comes over to build & play things with Paul his favorite big pal, one of the interns.

One afternoon as we were leaving, a little girl came to the gate from across the street, “When you come home can we do that thing when everyone sits at the table real quiet and sings and we all get a cup and napkin?” That ‘thing’ is snack time. Her little face is so hopeful. It is little enough to ask. We wish to thank you for making it possible to say yes to so many faces filled with hope and so many faces with just a trace of hope beginning to return.

We send our thanks and gratitude to the members of the Anthroposophical Society in America, The Camphill Communities in North America, Camphill Orion, Coros Institute, The Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund, People of the Sun Fund, Raphael House of San Francisco, Rudolf Steiner Foundation, San Francisco Foundation, The San Francisco Waldorf School grade 8, Karen Apana, Seymour Kaufman, Alex McGrath, Patricia Phelan and the many individual donors who give their vital support, our wonderful enriching volunteers, the hand work group, the Secret Santa’s and to Ellie Wood, without whose love and support we would not have been able to do this work.

Wishing you many peaceful and joy filled days,

Carol Cole, David Barlow
and The Board of Sophia Project

A word about photographs: in consultation with the families at Sophia House the board has decided not to use photographs of the children or families in our literature. Instead we will use artistic renderings. As one mother put it “when we were homeless it was not so important but now we are almost getting normal and we will just be a part of the neighborhood... so if you don’t have to..” In order to ensure that the children and families will continue to feel this is a safe place to heal and grow without risk of shame or exposure to the larger community, now or years from now, we are happy to honor this wish.

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