



Nourishing and protecting the light within each child

Serving children and families  
at risk for reoccurring homelessness  
through

Early childhood education,  
Infant and Toddler care,  
Before and After School program,  
Respite care,  
Arts programs,  
Child development classes,  
Family support

And Now We Are Two... Houses!

Dear Friends,

September 2005

The past year has been one of growth through the courageous meeting of challenges big and small. We have experienced this in the project as a whole, in the individual children and in the families. In the accounts\* below we hope you will have a glimpse of this growth made possible through your strong support. Thank you for all you have made possible.

### **Growth in a child**

When Luis, 3 years old, arrived in January he and his family were still struggling with homelessness. His mother was overwhelmed with the care of her other child, a 10 year old handicapped girl, and was unable to do more than meet Luis' basic needs. They had all experienced domestic violence. It took consistent careful guidance for Luis to learn to trust others and to interact with the other children without hitting. After a half year he is much more peaceful and has found his way through the trauma. He spends a lot of time on the swings singing. With his arms extended to the side to hold onto the swing, it is easy to see his disfigured arm which healed poorly after it was broken in a violent incident- a painful reminder of what he and many of our children endure. Less visible but equally powerful are the inner capacities Luis is now building which enable him to wait for a turn on the beloved swing, ask for help for a starting push and immerse himself in the swinging movement and in his joyful (and quite loud) song: "The Itsy-Bitsy Spider went up the waterspout. Down came the rain and washed the spider out. Out came the sun and dried up all the rain, and the Itsy-Bitsy Spider went up the spout again." Perhaps Luis recognizes some of his own tenacity in that of the spider he sings about with such enthusiasm.

### **Growth in a family**

The Garcia family was one of four families chosen from 250 applicants to receive a house through Habitat for Humanity. The selection criteria included family stability and the ability to help address the social difficulties in the neighborhood. These qualities and skills have been gained while the family has been a part of Sophia Project. Because of our close relationship to the family we were able to accompany them through the extensive application, meeting and interview process. In November this family of six will move into a new home only blocks from Sophia Project. Not only has this obviously brought great joy to them, all the families have felt uplifted in seeing a family with their same struggles do well.

\* The following accounts are actual but the names have been changed



### **Growth in the project**

And we too know dreams can come true, we now have a second house! Eight months ago what is now the beautiful, light-filled Myrtle House was a drug house, an extremely rundown and neglected Victorian in need of major repair of all types including a new foundation, interior and exterior renovation, a new roof, landscaping, play area construction and fencing. With the amazing donation of the down payment from a board member and generous gifts from our supporters, we were able to meet the challenge of raising funds for obtaining and transforming the new house while continuing our regular operations and expanded programs. We now have a house for children birth to 3 years old, Myrtle House, which opened in August 2005. With this accomplishment Sophia Project has realized a major goal of creating separate programs for the infants and toddlers as well as living space for the staff and interns and offices for the organization. This

allows us to more successfully meet the specific needs of all the children, the infants and toddlers, the 3, 4 and 5 year olds, and the older school children. We have been able to increase our capacity for respite care and continue to meet the specific needs of each family. We now serve approximately 65 children and their families.

### **The Story of the New House**

Having paid off the Sophia House mortgage we were in a position to look for a second house. In November 2004 we found a house that met our criteria of being within walking distance to Sophia House, affordable, potentially large enough and not occupied by families who would then be displaced. In January 2005 we began renovations and after the foundation was replaced the house was rewired, plumbed and the inside was completely demolished (except for the framing). In April we were chosen as a project of Rebuilding Together Oakland, a nonprofit whose main focus is renovation of low income senior housing, who greatly assisted with the landscaping. The children's spaces were blessed and opened on August 15. The offices and living space were completed in September.



This added presence of care and availability of services is having an uplifting effect on the area to those nearby struggling with the effects of homelessness, poverty and violence.

As the work became more visible to the residents in the neighborhood and our established network of families, one of the children's fathers reflected- "It's really great that you didn't just knock it down, but instead fixed it up. Yeah, fixed it up!" Other neighbors said it was important for their children to see something that was falling apart and rundown become transformed and made beautiful. Many people came by to ask how they could get help with their house. The staff and interns at Sophia Project will collaborate with Rebuilding Together Oakland to identify seniors in the neighborhood whose houses need renovations and will volunteer next April when new projects are chosen.

Because of the opening of a new house, we are much more visible in the neighborhood. Interns and staff walk the block and a half between Sophia House and Myrtle House often.

### **Before and After School Program**

Several times a year we are in contact with the families who have gone on from the program; we also have conversations with the children's teachers in their new schools. All of our children continue to do well in school. What is most striking is that literally every teacher has commented on the children's social skills and concern for the well being of their classmates and teachers. These are indeed remarkable children. After having come through serious difficulties they are not hurtful to others as is most often the case with children who have experience violence in their early years, rather they are able to be helpful and kind. This is an outcome we both hoped for and expected.

In the coming years we hope to add another staff person to our community whose focus would be working with the program for elementary school age children. We have more requests for this service than we can currently provide.

### **Infant Toddler Program**

At this time all the children in the program are walking. The youngest, 10 months, has taken her first steps and each day she grows steadier although for any situation of great importance she resorts to her high speed crawl.

These smallest children literally make their being from the environment. We are grateful to be able to replace the chaos, stress and fear which usually surrounds them with peace, beauty, warmth and light. For their typically young mothers Myrtle House is a safe place to leave their child when they must and a trusted place to learn how to care for them through working individually with the program director. These youngest ones begin arriving at 6:15 a.m. and stay for the next 10 to 12 hours. They are a delight and it is a privilege to accompany and guide their mothers to an appreciation of the miracle and significance of the first 3 years of life.

### **Respite Care**

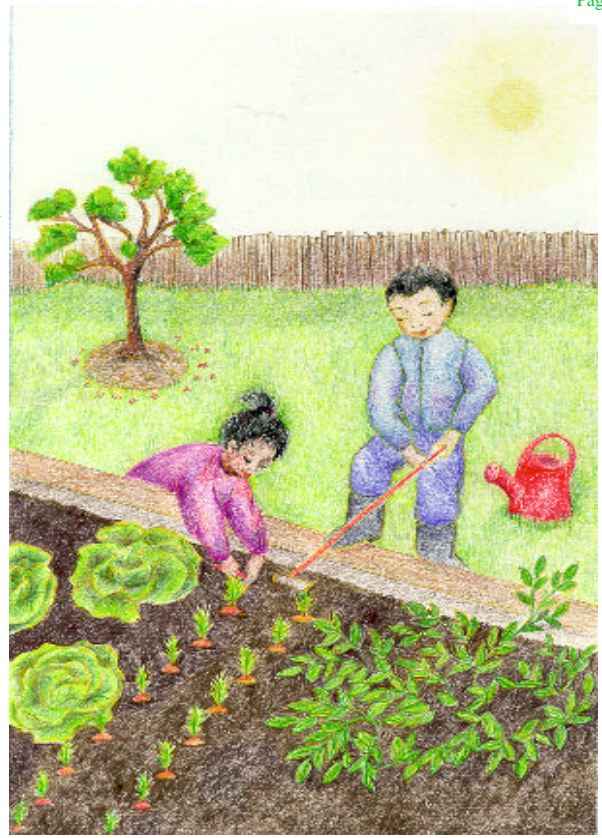
The respite care program at Sophia Project continues to be a valuable service for the families as one of the most effective tools for child abuse prevention and relief from the fear, violence, and the stress that poverty and homelessness create. Sophia Project offers care in a safe and trusted place for the children over the weekends for two nights and three days. With the opening of the second house we can expand our capacity for respite care. Because of the smaller setting in Myrtle House we will be able to meet the needs of the most vulnerable families including the children in our population who are sometimes on suicide watch.

**Staff**

In light of this expansion and the necessary reorganization, Sophia Project has made major staff changes. We have increased our live-in community of long term coworkers and interns from six people to nine. To meet the varied tasks of increased fundraising, we now have three part-time development positions. This three-part model is working very well. Jo Ellen Peterson, development director, brings many years of experience in development including her long experience as development director at Raphael House, a family homeless shelter in San Francisco. Gay White concentrates on the research and writing of foundation grants and reports and Serena Elize Flores works as executive assistant.

**Intern Program**

We now have five live-in interns who are here for the 11-month internship. While with Sophia Project they participate in a highly structured program which includes direct service, supervision meetings with the program director, study of topics pertaining to our work, curriculum and child development study, artistic activities, monthly processing meetings with an outside counselor and all aspects of community life. Three of our current interns have come to us through the national AmeriCorps Volunteer Program.



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.

Pictures by  
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Wishing you many peaceful and joy filled days,

Carol Cole, David Barlow  
and The Board of Sophia Project

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