

A Room at the Inn

Rebuilding Lives -
One Mother,
One Baby,
One Family
at a Time

Pregnant. Alone. No money. No support. Kicked out of the house. Abandoned by family. Nowhere to turn. Homeless. Unfortunately, these scenarios have become all too familiar in today's society; however, in St. Louis, Missouri, pregnant women who find themselves out of options, yet don't want an abortion, will find there is always room at the Inn. For over 35 years, Our Lady's Inn (OLI or Inn) has been welcoming pregnant women and their dependent children who have nowhere else to turn.

Melissa already had a three year old son when she became pregnant again. With no support, and a toddler who wouldn't listen, she was at a loss as to what to do next when she learned about Our Lady's Inn.*

Sanya, pregnant with twins, was on her way to have an abortion. Living in a one bedroom apartment with her grandmother, she realized she couldn't stay there and had no way to live on her own. She believed she had no other choice when a chance encounter with a sidewalk counselor led her to Our Lady's Inn.*

Erica was a drug user and pregnant. With several failed attempts to become clean, and a stay in jail, she was intent on delivering a healthy baby. After completing an inpatient drug treatment program, she made her way to Our Lady's Inn.*

* Names have been changed to protect the privacy of the women whose stories were shared.

An Idea to Start



It started out as an idea among a group of pro-life supporters – provide a safe place for pregnant women who want to have their babies yet were considering or being pressured into having an abortion because of their circumstances. "I don't have a choice;" my parents or my

boyfriend is making me get an abortion;" these were some of the comments the pro-life support group members regularly heard," relates Gloria Lee, operations director for Our Lady's Inn. "That's when members of the group began to see a need for a safe place where women could have their babies."

In 1982, through a grassroots effort, a building in South St. Louis was secured and the first Our Lady's Inn began accepting clients. Five years later, in 1987, a second location opened in North St. Louis in an old convent, which had been rehabbed by volunteers. "This location could house 12 families. The chapel was converted into one big room which served as a dorm room that housed six single women who were pregnant and there were three or four bedrooms that were family bedrooms for pregnant mothers with dependent children."



In 1997, the two locations merged into one location with the ability to house up to 18 families. It became known as Our Lady's Inn – St. Louis. ►►

With the success of the St. Louis location and the continuing rise in need, Our Lady's Inn opened a second location in 2006, Our Lady's Inn – St. Charles, in St. Charles, Missouri, with the capacity to house 12 families.

"The mission of Our Lady's Inn is to provide pregnant women and their children shelter and hope for a new life through humble acts of love," explains Peggy Forrest, executive director at Our Lady's Inn. "We shelter and support women who've made the choice for life for their unborn children. Our focus is to address all of the issues they're facing – health issues, mental health issues, substance abuse issues and homelessness, and take them to a place where they can have a healthy baby, keep their family together, be good parents and have a safe, secure and stable housing situation."

"The majority of our women are homeless. On occasion we get women, who in the true sense, aren't homeless, but maybe their parents kicked them out, or they're escaping domestic violence, so those types of things would qualify as being homeless because if they don't get an abortion they have no place else to go," states Lee.

Keeping families together makes Our Lady's Inn unique, as many maternity homes throughout the country don't accept a pregnant woman with dependent children; however, OLI will take in these families with up to four dependent children.

More than a Room

Our Lady's Inn is much more than just a maternity home or shelter for pregnant women. They offer programs to help these mothers-to-be from prenatal to postnatal care with services falling into three categories - residential services, transitional housing and an aftercare program.

Residential Services

In addition to shelter, food and clothing, Our Lady's Inn also provides support in a variety of ways. When a pregnant woman first enters OLI, she is assigned a case manager and a complete assessment is done which takes into account all her needs, and if she has children, their needs as well.

Once the assessment is completed, the case manager and client will develop a person-centered plan, which identifies the woman's strengths, weaknesses, wishes and desires for herself and her family, and then together they develop goals and an action plan for achieving those goals.

On staff at each location is a child advocate who works specifically and solely with the children, dealing with all of their educational needs and helping the mothers understand age-appropriate behavioral expectations.

Classes are offered in parenting, childbirth preparation, child development, educational preparedness, job readiness, smoking cessation, pre- and postnatal care and more.

"We encourage the women who don't have a high school diploma to get a GED, either through an online program or with tutors," Forrest explains. "We have some clients who have a little bit of college and we've worked to help them get back into college."

Many of the women who come to Our Lady's Inn are high-risk pregnancies. "Our women are in a crisis situation, whether they are homeless, have addictions or mental health issues, and these factors lead to high-risk pregnancies," clarifies Forrest. "We have nurses on staff to provide nursing support, ensuring moms make and keep appointments with an obstetrician and follow their doctor's directions, for example monitoring blood pressure."

Forrest continues, "Our whole program is really focused on sober living support as many of our women these days come from a substance abuse background. For some, it's how they grew up; others found that lifestyle on their own, but as everywhere in the United States, substance abuse is a huge, huge issue. So we do everything we can to support them in trying to live clean and sober lives." That support starts with counselors at each location to help identify and address mental health issues or addictions, and when necessary make referrals to community mental health providers or identify additional resources that may be needed. As Forrest explains, the goal for the women in the residential program is simple, "to have a healthy, drug-free birth and eventually find safe and adequate housing."



More than 6,000 women helped since 1982, over 11,000 volunteer hours per year, over 16,000 nights of shelter provided in 2016 and 512 children saved in 2016.

After Care Program

Women have the option to stay up to a year from the time they arrive at the Inn, yet most are ready to leave before the year is up. Last year, the average stay at OLI between both locations was 82 days. Upon leaving the Inn, each woman is offered two years of support through the After Care Program. In this program, advocates and case managers meet regularly with the mothers to provide assistance with housing referrals for permanent or transitional housing, material support, advocacy, well-being visits and much more to ensure these families find success.

Transitional Housing

Realizing there are times when some of these women may need a little extra help, OLI established a transitional housing unit in St. Louis. Founded in 2005, the transitional housing unit - Brother Loyola Transitional Housing in St. Louis - features four units, each one a fully furnished one bedroom apartment. This one year transitional living program provides a mother, baby and any dependent children with additional and continuing support while allowing them some independence. While taking advantage of this program, residents are expected to work, attend school or be in a job training program.

The Kindness of Others

There is no cost to the women who come to Our Lady's Inn for any of the services – food, shelter, clothing, baby supplies or the in-house classes. Medicaid pays for most medical expenses and if a woman is not enrolled when she arrives, the case manager will help her apply with OLI paying her expenses until she is fully enrolled in Medicaid.

Approximately 30 percent of funding for OLI comes from grants - federal, state or local community grants- the rest comes from individual donations, family foundations and a few corporate philanthropic foundations. The Twice Blessed Resale Shop, which is more of a boutique than a traditional thrift store, is run by OLI in St. Louis, and serves a dual purpose: all the money made from this resale shop goes directly to help support OLI, and the shop also serves as job training and employment for some of the OLI residents.

Looking Back While Looking Forward

"In the beginning, pregnancy was the biggest issue we dealt with and now that's probably the easiest issue we deal with," reminisces Lee. "As the federal mental health budget has decreased over the years, many women with mental health issues who become pregnant are left to fend for themselves, leaving some homeless and in need of services. We're also seeing a rise in drug dependency, with heroin being rampant. These issues make it important for these women to receive help and medical treatment."

As for measuring the success of Our Lady's Inn, Forrest explains, "We measure success in a number of different ways. Our primary goal is to have healthy babies, so we measure success by gestational age and birth weight and in 2016, 91 percent of our women delivered babies who were a normal gestational age and over five pounds. We consider it a success if clients have been able to secure stable housing, keep the family together, and if they continue to work their addictions programs and once they leave they stay clean and sober. Securing employment is also another measure of success." ►►

18 Member Spotlight - *Our Lady's Inn*

Forrest and Lee both agreed that one of the things that hasn't changed over the years is the consistent support of the community and the volunteers. "In the early days, we ran on volunteers and couldn't have done it without them," acknowledges Lee, "and today, they still add so much to our program. They do everything from answering the phones to childcare, from organizing the storerooms and sorting of donations to running the thrift store, they all have heart for the mission." And it's that heart that Forrest acknowledges plays a large role in the success of the Inn. "We believe everyone leaves here as a successful client, even if they're only here for a week and for that one week, they knew that there was a group of people who cared about them and have dedicated their lives to caring, that's truly a success."

Over the last 35 years, Our Lady's Inn has gained a well-earned reputation for care. OLI receives referrals from the pregnancy resource centers that work with pregnant women in crisis as well as from doctors, hospitals, pastors, church groups and even from attorneys and judges. OLI is also part of the homeless hotline network in the city, St. Louis County and St. Charles County.

The statistics are astounding: more than 6,000 women helped since 1982, over 11,000 volunteer hours per year, over 16,000 nights of shelter provided in 2016 and 512 children saved in 2016. Forrest puts these statistics into perspective, "In this day and age, when it's okay to walk into an abortion clinic and treat that gift of life as though it's just a problem, these women know it's not, and despite their circumstances and uphill battle, they've chosen life. I think that's very courageous. They're very courageous."



Sanya's healthy, full-term twin girls.

It's that courage that not only led Melissa, Sanya and Erica to OLI, but helped them create a better future for themselves and their families.

With the help of the OLI staff, Melissa learned her three year old son was profoundly deaf, the reason he didn't respond to her commands, and the staff was able to get him the hearing aids he needed. Melissa delivered a healthy baby, and the family of three now has hope for a bright future.*

After moving into OLI, Sanya delivered healthy, full-term twin girls. She is working on her short and long-term goals and is on her way to a better future for herself and her daughters.*

And Erica, with the help of the staff at OLI, participated in a treatment and 12-step program where she developed a network of support. Clean and sober, she delivered a healthy baby boy and has been able to provide him a secure and loving home.*

Just like Melissa, Sanya and Erica, many of these women arrive with very little hope for their future or the future of their children, yet they leave with a plan to help realize their goals, the continuing support of Our Lady's Inn and most of all, hope.

The message is clear. Women in St. Louis who become pregnant, are alone, with no money, no support, kicked out of the house, abandoned by family with nowhere to turn and homeless, there is a room at the Inn waiting for them, with a staff of people who have dedicated themselves to rebuilding lives - one mother, one baby, one family at a time. ☀

