

# Matching Needs to Resources

Phoenix Family Housing offers help beyond four walls and a roof.

words KELLI WHITE | photos MATTHEW TAYLOR

It didn't just happen overnight. And it's not going to go away any time soon. Poverty. It's happening here ... not far away from our very backyards.

But organizations like Phoenix Family Housing are making strides toward improving the quality of life for people living in poverty.

Phoenix Family Housing is a non-profit public charity that offers onsite support services to low-income families in affordable housing properties throughout Kansas and Missouri. The organization provides integrated social support services to nearly 6,000 people in 30 different communities in 12 cities.

Jonathan Cohn, Overland Park resident and CEO of the property management company, Yarco, Inc., is one of the founders of Phoenix Family Housing.

"The birth of Phoenix happened because people around us saw a need in our community, and they cared enough to join us and take action," he says.

## THE BEGINNINGS OF A GREAT IDEA

In the late 1980s a Yarco employee, Bill Foreman, and his wife, Cindy, lived in and managed an affordable housing property in Kansas City. Since they lived on-site, they saw the variety of renters with low income and witnessed the daily challenges these families faced just trying to survive. Cindy began helping the kids at the apartment building with after-school tutoring, arts, crafts and activities. She saw the need and was available and willing to help.

"Phoenix Family Housing grew organically from there," says Jonathan.

With Cindy's help, Jonathan and his father, Cliff, realized that a core segment of Yarco's business—providing housing to low-to-moderate income families—addressed only a tiny part of the overall problem of poverty in our community.

Providing affordable shelter was just not enough to break the cycle of poverty, according to Jonathan. Many people living in these communities also need on-site services to help them as they work to overcome barriers to success. Jonathan and Cliff decided there was more they should be doing to help their residents achieve self-sufficiency.

PHOENIX FAMILY EMPOWERS  
PEOPLE LIVING IN LOW-INCOME  
HOUSING COMMUNITIES WITH  
THE ON-SITE SUPPORT THEY  
NEED TO GAIN STABILITY AND  
ACHIEVE SELF-SUFFICIENCY.

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## INSPIRATIONS

Families in affordable housing complexes are often at poverty level and are not able to tap into the same resources others have at their disposal.

"They typically do not have access to things they need to help them be successful such as nutrition, health care, and school supplies," Jonathan says.

Phoenix Family Housing conducts a needs and services assessment, which is used to custom design the onsite programs and services for residents. Phoenix Family ensures that each program is appropriate for the needs of the people living in each community.

The result? Families don't have to worry about getting to the support because it is accessible right where they live.

### INTERACTIVE SUPPORT SERVICES

One important service within Phoenix Family Housing is the Youth Development Program that provides activities designed to help kids in poverty overcome challenges. The services range from tutoring, after-school activities, computer lab assistance and entrepreneurial programs.

Jonathan tells the powerful story of how Phoenix began its entrepreneurial programs. About 10 years ago, Phoenix Family helped 24 kids, 8 to 12 years old, to build a community garden. By planting the seeds and harvesting the vegetables, the kids learned a system of work and reward. From the vegetables, they made salsa, named it Sassy Salsa from the Village, submitted it to competitions and won awards.

In August of that year, after seeing the project's success and sensing the kids' enjoyment from the harvest and subsequent activities, Jonathan and his father presented the kids with an entrepreneurial lesson of how to make money from their salsa. The idea was to form a corporation, secure an investor, and locate a company to mass-produce the salsa and so on. The goal was for each child to earn \$50 by Christmas.

The kids, however, evolved that idea. According to Jonathan, they still wanted to make the salsa and earn money, but wanted to give their profits back to Phoenix Family's after-school program that allowed them to do the project in the first place. The enthusiastic youth with a newfound purpose just wanted more projects because they enjoyed working together and toward a goal.

Today, those kids have grown and are gone from the community, but the salsa is still produced

### EYE-OPENING STATISTICS

- In 2009, the poverty line in the U.S. for a family of four was a total annual household income of less than \$22,050.
- In 2009, the family poverty rate and the number of families in poverty were 11.1 percent and 8.8 million, respectively, up from 10.3 percent and 8.1 million in 2008.
- The number of people in poverty in 2009 is the largest number in the 51 years for which poverty estimates are available.
- The nation's official poverty rate in 2009 was 14.3 percent, which means that approximately 43.6 million Americans, or 1 in 7, were living in poverty.

Sources: [www.worldbunger.org](http://www.worldbunger.org) and [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)

### HOW YOU CAN HELP BREAK THE CYCLE

Volunteer your time, money or resources to improve lives in nearby communities by visiting [www.phoenixfamily.org](http://www.phoenixfamily.org) or by calling (816) 561-1033.

Attend Phoenix Family Housing's 2011 fundraiser, Masquer8, on April 21 at the Hyatt Regency Crown Center. Attendees are encouraged to partake in the masquerade theme by wearing a mask. Cocktails and silent auction are part of the event. "Come see the difference Phoenix Family Housing makes, meet staff and supporters and have a good time," Jonathan Cohn, CEO of the property management company Yarco, Inc., says. Tickets are \$125 per person. For more information, visit the Web site listed above or call (816) 616-8917.



and all monies go toward youth programs at that property.

This is just one example of what Phoenix Family Housing makes possible.

“Supporting youth and connecting kids to opportunities they may not otherwise have gives them a stronger sense of self-worth, a better school experience and is essentially an attempt to transcend poverty,” Jonathan says.

In addition to the Youth Development Program, Phoenix Family Housing has two other programs: Family First and Senior Empowerment. All services are customized for each apartment community.

The Family First program has two phases. The initial phase helps families meet immediate survival needs by offering access to food pantries, computer labs to search for resources, drug/alcohol counseling, direct emergency assistance and domestic violence response. The second phase encompasses services to help families become more self-sufficient. Educational programs like nutrition and budgeting are available, in addition to help with resume building, and computer labs to research employment opportunities.

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## INSPIRATIONS

The Senior Empowerment program works with older adults, helping them to live independently with dignity and choice.

“For low-income older adults, the natural changes of aging are often amplified,” Jonathan says. “They’re more likely to suffer health-related problems and because they lack the financial resources they face additional challenges in securing the necessary services that help maintain their independence.”

### SEEDS OF CHANGE

What began years ago as a department of Yarco has grown to become an independent public charity with 34 staff members that for more than 10 years has been partnering with property management companies and property owners where resident needs can be better supported by targeted resources.

“The changes that Phoenix Family is able to bring to each community are long-term and sustainable,” Jonathan says. “Everyone in the community—from the owners to the residents—embraces the program.”

Jonathan says one reason Phoenix Family Housing has grown and has myriad success stories to be told is due to the efforts and passion of its executive director, Kimber Myers Givner and her staff. “They are the reason this enterprise has flourished,” says Jonathan.

Cindy Foreman, the organization’s first service coordinator, still works with Phoenix today. “From the seed Cindy planted,” Jonathan says, “has grown a beautiful and strong oak. I am proud to be associated with such an extraordinary team.” ❖



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