



A Home For Ursula and Lily
By Jayne Gillis

“This is lovely,” said 60-year-old Ursula Jones as she set down the few possessions she had on the perfectly white, crisp looking but soft feeling sheets covering the bed in her new simple but bright, sunny-windowed room. This pleasant, clean and happy place she would be sharing with her granddaughter Lily for six months. Her mood instantly lifted.

This wasn’t an ordinary bedroom in an apartment or house she was accustomed to, and

one she never thought she would be in. Solomon's Temple was a homeless shelter in South Atlanta for women and children. Jones was a slight of build, almost frail woman who looked decades older than her age. She and her seven-year-old granddaughter are just two of the more than 10,000 people in metro Atlanta experiencing homelessness on any given night, and part of the staggering 40 percent being women and children.



Called “grandfamilies,” the latest fallout from the opioid crisis, are grandparents like Jones who have set aside retirement to care for the children of their children who are either deceased, still using, or incarcerated. Jones found herself in a position to be grandmother and mother—essentially a grandfamily---after her daughter died of a fentanyl-laced heroin overdose. Soon after, Lily came to live with Jones, she experienced her own misfortune when she was laid off from her position at Target. Living so close to poverty, the job loss was devastating, and one that now affected her eight-year-old granddaughter Lilly.

A referral to Solomon's Temple was life changing. The homeless shelter provided six months of housing, job skills training, financial literacy, and other life skills. Not only was Solomon's Temple a positive place for this grandfamily, but Restoration Atlanta or RATL (pronounced "rattle"), a nonprofit that began in 2011, was a Solomon's partner that would offer after-school child care and summer camps that Lily could enjoy while Ursula worked.



Solomon's Temple was founded by Solomon Smallwood, financial advisor to Justin Bieber, Chris Brown, and Usher. RATL was founded by Jim Ellison, a former church pastor who saw a need to more closely connect families in the community who wanted to serve in a more meaningful way with shelter residents. "Typically it's a drop off and leave," said Ellison about the average interaction between volunteers and shelter residents. He explained that RATL is different because the entire family can serve on Mission Weekends, giving resident families dignity and a sense of community versus being "the other."

“The families I met who came to visit made me feel like I was still a person,” according to Jones, whose demeanor became somber as she explained how she felt first fear and then a complete failure not being able to properly care for her granddaughter.

Jones became pensive and it seemed she wanted to make sure to let me know that she was a typical person from a simple and rather conventional past. She recalled her childhood as being happy, one where she played in an East side predominantly black city neighborhood with other children after school and in the summers.

She entered the workforce after high school and soon married her first love Ron, with whom together they raised four children and worked hard to provide for them. She said she never remembers a time as an adult that she wasn't working. When Ron later passed away unexpectedly to cancer, she said paying the bills by herself was difficult, but she was managing until she lost her job. She was referred to Solomon's and RATL was right there to help so she could build her life back and be able to find work again without the pressure of figuring out where she was going to sleep and providing a safe place for Lily.

RATL's after-school care is not a revolutionary idea for shelters. What is unique are RATL's Mission Weekends in which non-resident families pay \$100 per person to spend a Friday overnight and half day Saturday in fellowship with resident families, followed by a craft, sharing meals, playing with the children, and socializing. Volunteers range from local high schools, colleges, and families wanting to serve in meaningful ways together.



“What we offer

for residents is after school care during the school year and summer camps when school is not in session,” Ellison explained. “This allows women residents with children to find employment, and work hours that are not tied so closely to their children’s school schedule.”

Also provided by partner organizations are financial counseling, medical assistance, and help to find gainful employment—all to break the cycle of poverty and homelessness. Despite being entrenched in an urban South Atlanta Cleveland Street neighborhood, Solomon’s Temple is a refurbished school with plenty of greenspace and other play areas for children. In fact, Solomon’s has the most land of any homeless shelter in the Atlanta metro region.

Ellison said what is really great to see is that after the six months are over, residents will find housing near RATL so they can still take part in what the organization has to offer: spiritual support and growth and child care year-round. “We love these ongoing relationships,” said Ellison.

“Being with is more transformative than doing for is the motto of RATL,” said Cristina Crays, an Agnes Scott alumnae, Chick-Fil-A owner/operator, and RATL three-year Board member. She explained how typical contact and service with homeless shelter residents is to donate and drop off. This is what sets RATL apart.

Crays said that the weekends spent with Solomon's residents were transformative for both her and her high school daughter. "Living in our nice, sheltered suburb, it was amazing to see how really similar we all are," she said. "As mothers and daughters, we essentially want the same things for our children: good education and safe places to grow, she said. "You also realize how at any point any of us could end up on the street."

Crays daughter Hannah said her experiences were positive but also difficult as she listened to their devastating stories of being pushed out of their homes or coming home from school to find all of their possessions near the street.

"The stories are heartbreaking when you hear the residents explain how they ended up in these situations," said Hannah, who has served on several mission weekends either with her parents or with church and school groups. Now a high school senior at Centennial High School in Roswell, she said the bonds she formed and experiences she has had with the families over the past six years from middle school to now have been transformative. Her mom added: "None of the current families planned on being here. These families were born from circumstance and built on loss."

*"These (homeless) families were born from circumstance
and built on loss. "*

*- - - Christina Crays, Restoration Atlanta Board Member
& Volunteer*

Ellison also debunked the misconceptions of the general public. “Many people think it’s as simple as ‘just get a job,’ ” but it’s much more complicated than that. He cited a 2013 U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development study that found 55% of the homeless had worked during the previous year. Further, the reduction in the middle class is clear. According to RATL’s website, “There is no county in the U.S. where the federal minimum wage is enough to afford a Fair Market Rent one bedroom apartment. This explains how close to the edge of homelessness the working poor and many, many people are.”

Unfortunately, there is a downside to homeless shelters like Solomon’s, which faith-based RATL and other partnering, mainly Christian faith-based organizations embrace with their teachings. In 2011, “Huffington Post” (“Homeless Shelter Systems and What They Don’t Tell You,” Carey Fuller, December 27, 2011.) revealed a rather unknown or unnoticed fact. If you are Muslim, Buddhist, or Jewish, the expectation is that to get help you must participate in the shelter’s Christian teachings, in which conversion is ultimately expected. Even Crays unknowingly admitted that the Saturday morning Bible studies and weekly worship events entice participation by offering coffee only if the women join in.

“...How can you say you’re helping ALL of the community when you obviously have an agenda?” according to the “Huffington Post.” Fuller writes, “The idea that you won’t help because someone does not choose to believe as you do is both ignorant and disrespectful to other cultures.”

Perhaps if these faith centers other than Christian-based ones were more available in offering respite for the homeless, this would offset this negative, somewhat hidden fact.

At least the government has stepped in without bias, offering some relief for the newer wave of homeless grandfamilies. In early 2018, the House and Senate passed the Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Act, aimed at the approximately 2.8 million children being

raised by grandparents or another family member. This number is expected to increase as the fallout from the drug crisis continues its destructive path, according to Katy Kelly, aarp.org, July 10, 2018.

Enacted into law on July 7, 2018, it will establish a Federal Advisory Council to support grandparents and other relatives raising children. The Council's charge is to identify, promote, coordinate, and disseminate information about resources and best practices to help relative caregivers meet the health, educational, nutritional, and other needs of the children in their care, as well as maintain their own physical and mental health and emotional well-being.

"What we have experienced is joy and hope," said Jones, with Lily piping in: "And it's really fun and I get to play in the water on Fridays. I'm really going to miss it here."

Ursula and Lily are success stories, spending six months in Solomon's and RATL "being with" other families who are not in homelessness. These interactions, along with all the educational, financial, and other life skill assistance, have made it possible for this grandfamily to transition on its own back to a stable life in an apartment near RATL. RATL has made its constant positive energy, love, and support for one of its families a beacon of hope to others who are in crisis.

Another strength is that only women and children are allowed at the shelter and virtually all shelters. Men and boys are not allowed in the same resident shelters as a safety precaution for all parties. Ellison said that this is why the mixture of men and boys and women and girls who volunteer is so crucial for everyone. The positive interactions between genders within family structures are models for the residents to witness and hopefully follow, said Ellison, whose RATL concept has proven successful at first City of Refuge shelter and now Solomon's Temple.

This second homeless shelter that Restoration Atlanta has transformed is likely to be a prototype for other shelters around the Atlanta metro area and beyond.

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