



Sonja Chisholm
Gracious Hands

By Dawn Cauthen Thornton
Photos by Todd Youngblood

We see it every day. Without fail, there stands a person on a street corner, clothes tattered, backpack soiled, and unsteady hands holding a sign that reads, "Please Help... God Bless." Oftentimes I feel compelled to dig in my purse and hand them whatever I can find that will sustain them, at least for a few minutes. Two days ago, I handed a gentleman a cold bottle of water and a small bag of pretzels that was supposed to be my daughter's snack. She didn't mind. When we got home she went and grabbed her piggy-bank and asked could we go back and give it to him so he could buy himself a house.

According to the Housing Instability and Homelessness Report of January 2017, 44% of the homeless population in Charlotte were female and 21% were children. There were close to 2,600 permanent housing beds available for occupancy, which has increased 16% from the previous year and 321% the last seven years. One of the silent soldiers helping to fight the good fight and increase these numbers is Sonja Chisolm, co-founder/Director of Gracious Hands Transitional Housing for Homeless Women and Children.

Sonja has never been homeless but she does know how it feels to not have a place to call her own. For a moment in her life, she and her three children lived with her mother, until she could afford a home.

Gracious Hands initially just offered a bed and a hot meal to whomever was in need. As time passed, Sonja and her former partner noticed the women needed guidance in other areas as well. They began to offer onsite psychological counseling, life coaching, credit repair, and job related skills that would allow them to obtain and sustain a paying job. After Sonja's partner decided to leave the venture, Sonja expanded her services further and partnered with a staffing agency to ensure more women would have the opportunity to work and earn her own money at a decent hourly wage. She also partners with ResCare, a program that helped women 25 years and younger attend school. She has also been in contact with Habitat for Humanity in hopes of a resident eventually being blessed with a newly constructed single family home. Even Commonwealth Bank wants to help the women open a bank account, the first for some, and deposit the first \$25.

Acceptance into the program isn't automatic and it's not easy to live up to Sonja's high standards. Potential residence must have experienced domestic violence, homelessness, and/or substance abuse to be considered. The women and children can reside at the transitional home for one year, provided they are in good standing with the expectations. "Each resident must have a job and go to work every day, they must save 50% of their income and put it into escrow, and they must abide by the curfew of 9:00 pm unless they have a job that ends a little later," Sonja explains. There are other rules, and some can't cut it and decide to leave shortly after they move in. But most want to change the lifestyle that landed them there in the first place. Sonja becomes a mentor to many of the ladies, and a grandmother to the precious children who become a part of her life for a short time.

She feels a tremendous sense of responsibility to help her residence succeed after they're ready to move out and start over. "Getting a call from someone who is doing really well because of what they learned here always makes me feel good," Sonja's voice beams. The counseling the women receive while at Gracious Hands doesn't stop when they leave, they're able to continue the services for as long as they want, free of charge.



Over the last three years, the facility has housed 108 women, 111 children, and transitioned 47 families. The house can serve up to 6 families at a time. Because there is such a need, Gracious Hands is forced to turn families away every day. Those families may end up on the street if another housing facility doesn't have space. Sonja admits, "That's the most difficult part of what I do. Where are these families going to go?" Those instances happen much more often than the city would like to admit.

Managing lives that aren't yours can be stressful. The matriarch runs a tight ship in hopes of changing the path some ladies have already created. As strict as her residence thinks she is, Sonja knows what's waiting on the other side of the door when they make the decision to leave. She attempts to protect her ladies as long as she can.

Her goal is to open nine more transitional homes across the city to help tackle Charlotte's sky-high homeless population. "Every single shelter in the city is full right now. We need more housing."

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