

Homeless to happiness

Community uses faith to help woman's family get a new home, car

By Kyla Woodard
For Clay Today

GREEN COVE SPRINGS — A shed. A car. A hotel. Three places Crystal Chisholm and her sons had to call home until they found a place they could call their own.

A community means having support and somewhere to turn when things go wrong. And that's exactly what Chisholm's story entails.

With the help of Pastor John Sanders and the local True Vine Fellowship, the Breaking Bread Ministry and the Penney Retirement Community, Chisholm's village came together to improve her life. With a new car, home and job, Chisholm's story will forever be forged by the people around her.

Early this year, as a single mother, Chisholm was met with the plight of homelessness in a way she never expected. And, the road to her new life was not easy.

"It was despair. I didn't have anywhere to turn," Chisholm said.

After enduring a severe back injury on the job, Chisholm couldn't continue working. Using her workman's compensation initially, Chisholm said she was eventually let go from her job. Chisholm landed in a tough spot



STAFF PHOTOS BY DON COBLE

From left, Matthew, Crystal and Joshua Chisholm now have a home in Green Cove Springs. True Vine Fellowship, Penney Retirement Center, Breaking Bread Ministry and Orange Park United Methodist Church James Boys all banded to help the family who lost their home and were forced to live in a shed or car. True Vine's Pastor John Sanders gave the family keys to their home.

with no means to pay the rent.

After fighting off the first eviction notice, the second one left her and her children without a home. Losing most of her belongings, Chisholm was forced to pick up and start anew.

"It's so hard to get out on your feet. I feel that Green Cove is lacking ... when it comes to transitional housing. Or, people who are homeless and need help, especially mothers with children," Chisholm said.

During the hot Florida summer, Chisholm fought the battles of homelessness in any way she could. Utilizing her family member's shed at one point, the three spent their time in the small space. Chisholm said it ultimately fell through.

Desperate to supply a roof over her and her children's head, Chisholm had no choice but to spend her days and

SEE HAPPINESS, 18

Happiness

from page 1

nights in her car. Chisholm said that the same car had been running for three years with no air conditioning.

At a crossroads, Chisholm became desperate for change.

"I basically had, in my van, clothes and just basic necessities. Just what we needed. We were going to the food bank here in Green Cove, and they were helping me with toiletries and things like that," Chisholm said.

Between a rock and a hard place, Chisholm said her thoughts about the future began to become frightening.

"It got a little bit scary, as well. I would think, 'What am I going to do when it's time for the kids to go back to school?' A lot of thoughts were going through my mind at that time," Chisholm said.

Chisholm said she wanted to do better for her children. She said her boys were always questioning what their next step would be.

"It was very hard. I tried to keep a positive outlook through everything. I always told them, 'Don't worry. Things are going to happen,'" Chisholm said.

Wanting to save and protect her children from the feelings of despair, Chisholm tried to keep the weight off of them by ensuring that the hard times would not last long.

"When we were at the camp, we just



Crystal Chisholm has a place where she and her sons call home. Once homeless, several rallied give her a car, house, job ... and hope.

looked at it like, 'Oh, well, this is a camping trip for the summer, something we didn't get to do.' We always tried to look on the positive side," Chisholm said.

Searching for any opportunity for assistance, Chisholm came across Sanders and his ministry. From there, she took a leap of faith and reached out.

"I don't know if it was God or I don't know what it was. But I just happened to come across ... True Vine Transitional Center. I was thinking, 'I didn't know there was a homeless shelter or a transitional center in Green Cove,'" Chisholm said.

She said Sanders had called her back within a couple of days, wanting to meet

with her. Sanders said hearing her story really touched his heart.

"We sat there, and she told me everything she was going through. And, I told her, 'Let me see what I can do to help you out,'" Sanders said.

With the help of church congregation members and the Breaking Bread Ministry, Sanders said they came together to implement a plan of action.

Chisholm and her children stayed at Camp Chowenaw for a couple of weeks. Following their time at the camp, the ministry funded their move to an extended-stay hotel in Orange Park.

All the while, Chisholm said she was met with another surprise: a new car. After attending church one day, Chisholm was presented with a Toyota mini-van by Sanders and his church congregation.

"That was just another blessing. So, I donated my car without the AC because it ran back to the church. I just felt like that was the right thing to do," Chisholm said.

Chisholm said her blessings continued to roll in with her life on the up. After having back surgery and getting released from her neurologist, she was able to begin searching for a job. Last month, Chisholm also began her new job at the Penney Retirement Community.

Penney Retirement Community CEO Teresa Scott said hiring Chisholm for the job was easy. Chisholm's story was initially brought to her by Sanders, and Scott said she was more than happy to help Chisholm get back on her feet.

"We had the housekeeping position open. So, she came out, she interviewed, she did really well, and we were able to employ her," Scott said.

As another surprise, Chisholm was given a new home as one last gift in what she calls 'A whirlwind of blessings'.

Walking through the doors of her new home, Chisholm said she was overwhelmed with emotions. On her first night in the home, she cried tears of joy.

"The kids were so excited about picking their rooms ... the spirits were high, everybody was having fun, laughing, everyone was giggly. It was just a great experience to be back in a home again," Chisholm said. Her boys, Joshua and Matthew, were gifted bicycles from Orange Park United Methodist Church James Boys. The same group refurbishes bikes to be given away during the J.P. Hall Christmas Party each December.

For what she has been through, Chisholm said she will forever be grateful for the love and support she received from her community. Throughout her struggles, Chisholm's faith kept her going, not only for her but for her children. And she said she hopes others in similar situations will do the same.

"I would like to say to anybody who is going through a hard time or struggling right now, just to hang in there. Reach out to every resource you can because someone is willing to help you. And, you're only going to get help if you're willing to help yourself," Chisholm said.