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Women of Impact

Dana Ortiz

by Darin White,
photo by Steven Hertzog



For Dana Ortiz, it is all about the relationships, many of which channeled her passion for volunteering with homeless communities on the West Coast to becoming the director of Family Promise right here in Lawrence.

How does someone with a degree in microbiology from Fresno State and a long career in chemistry and biochemistry in the San Francisco Bay Area end up as the director of a nonprofit organization that helps families dealing with homelessness in Lawrence, Kansas? For Family Promise of Lawrence (FPL) Executive Director Dana Ortiz, it wasn't a direct road but a journey from Fresno to San Jose and eventually to Lawrence, where her husband got his Ph.D., and the couple decided to put down roots. Along the way, they raised two daughters, who are now off creating adventures of their own.

After graduating from Fresno State, Ortiz had a career for a number of years working in the sciences. She worked as a chemist and biochemist, led a group of project managers and served as a project manager working with pharmaceuticals and drug development. This training and skill set has been helpful in working with Family Promise of Lawrence, which supports families in housing crises, as she can break down elements starting with data and then responding to it.

During her time in the Bay Area, she was exposed to and involved with family homelessness as her work began. She volunteered with her faith community once a month helping staff The San Jose Family Shelter, where she met her husband. They got to know each other through volunteering, while staying up late and talking.

When The San Jose Family Shelter was just beginning, there was a call for volunteers to help build, launch and eventually serve in the shelter. During this process and through the years, Ortiz developed relationships with many families, a number of which she maintained relationships

with for many years. These meaningful relationships are what got her interested in getting involved from the beginning.

"One of the neat things that happens organically: When someone is hosting, they bring dinner, and they sit down with the family, and they are volunteering. The walls fall down, the scales on our own eyes fall away. We don't see this now as a volunteer or us versus them. Their kids play in the band with my kids. They play softball together. They remind me of my grandkids. And then you have people talking and listening to each other. There is no issue anymore, it's people," she explains.

In the Beginning

Ortiz volunteered during her time in the Bay area and also when she arrived in Lawrence. She found out about Family Promise from her local congregation, where she eventually helped as a host and later as a coordinator for the congregation. She has been the director of Family Promise since 2011 and believes the reason the Family Promise model works is because of relationships and the many people involved in the work.

"We work really hard to not be very cognizant of not being transactional. That every family that comes here comes with a real important story that's worth listening to and learning from. And [in] listening, each family will tell us what is helpful to them, and then we need to adjust our services to that, not the other way around."

The Family Promise model started 35 years ago in New Jersey as a local response to a local issue. The now-national movement is in nearly 200 cities across the country. The Lawrence Family Promise affiliate program started in 2008. This was initiated by Joe Reitz, a retired University

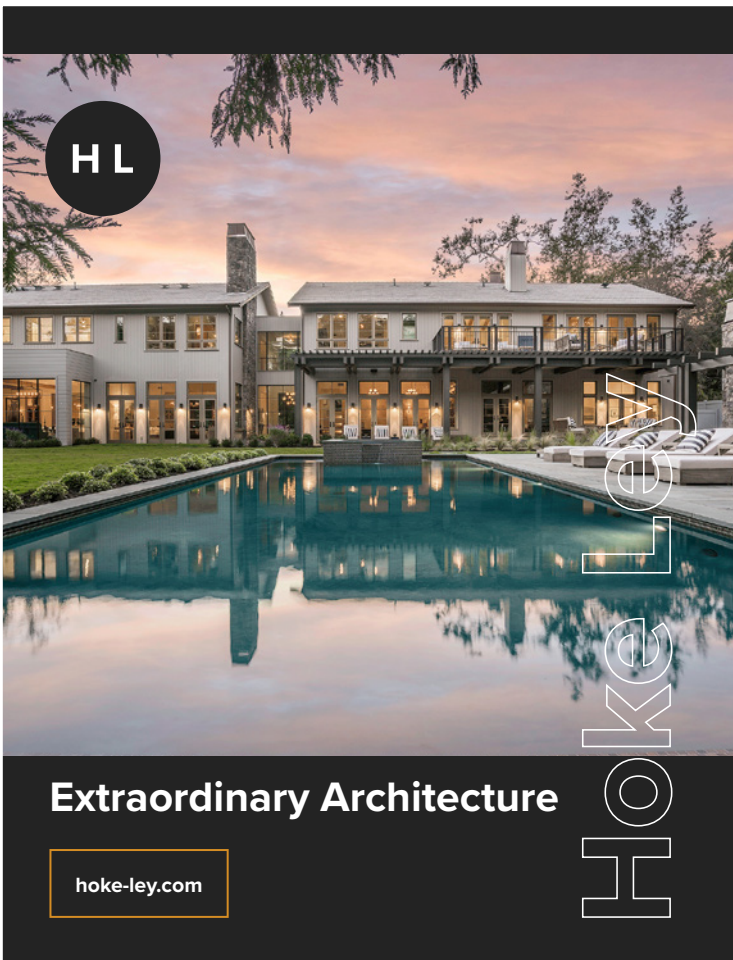
of Kansas ethics professor, who gathered a number of concerned citizens to seek out models that would help with family homelessness. The goal was to open before winter 2008, accomplished with the help of Valerie Miller-Coleman, who became the first executive director.

As an affiliate of a larger organization, the Lawrence location relies on support, research, data and programing assistance, and adjusts its program to meet the needs of the local community.

Originally, Lawrence Family Promise was helping to shelter families overnight in a number of different places of worship, had around 1000 volunteers and would assist with food and case management. In 2011, when Ortiz joined the staff, FPL started keeping data. It recorded an overwhelming 515 families needing services the first year of data-keeping, and it was able to serve 18 families. Because of this new data, the board realized it needed to expand support, which it has over time.

Changing With the Times

Family Promise of Lawrence shifts as the community or times change. Before COVID-19, it had a small Prevention of Homelessness Program and a smaller Diversion from Shelter Program, but when the pandemic hit, there was an immediate need for these programs to expand. The Prevention of Homelessness Program helps provide support for those who are at risk for losing their homes. The Diversion from Shelter Program asks how we can help families explore other safe sheltering options. It puts them on a path toward housing and eliminating the trauma of being sheltered, and also helps with the limited number of beds available in shelters.



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If, for instance, a family member is hosting a family but can't support them fully, and Family Promise can provide the support needed to keep the family in this situation, which is a better solution than providing a sheltering place. Ortiz believes the overall goal is to get families back into their own housing as quickly as possible so FPL can then help with stabilization. The best scenario is to prevent rather than respond. It is much more effective use of resources for the FPL program, as well as less traumatic for the families.

Since the pandemic, FPL has served four times more families annually than in previous years, and the call continues to be tremendous. The cost of housing, overall inflation costs, change of jobs and many other economic challenges have added to the additional obstacles for families and additional strain on an already-taxed system.

Family Promise of Lawrence currently partners with more than 30 diverse local organizations ranging from government, physical and mental health, food, clothing, housing and shelter, credit and economic counseling, trauma and abuse, and a number of other general support organizations. One of the strongest partners is Ninth Street Missionary Baptist Church, which provides the FPL Day Center and additional temporary housing.

It takes selfless individuals in a community to decide something must be done about an issue, step up and do the work, and influence others to do so, as well. Ortiz is one of those remarkable individuals who joined with others to help make a difference in our community.

Founding board member Katherine Dinsdale says, "Dana is a unifier and a motivator. She is an incredibly hard worker ... She is full of love and compassion, but not afraid to clearly state expectations. She asks the hard questions and delivers the hard answers. She can whip together a corporate flow chart, deliver and defend a complicated budget, and celebrate a lost tooth, a good report card or a full week sober, all in an afternoon. She tells stories that will bring you to tears and weaves in those pesky data points needed to earn a grant. I've never known such an effective and consistent mix of compassion and strength, intellect and heart."

In her FPL profile, Ortiz explains, "This job is hard and is also a gift and brings great joy. I consider it an honor to work with Family Promise guests, graduates, clients, our board, staff, volunteers and alongside other nonprofits and community leaders to make real changes in the lives of families who are experiencing homelessness or who are at risk of becoming homeless." She joyfully warns, "Be careful what you volunteer for; it really could change your life." ▲



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