

PIVOT

Running a Shelter

By Sarah Dixon



How did I end up here – painting and redecorating my office building? I am taking a break from it to write this. I hardly expected that painting and redecorating would be in my job description when I was in law school. My career path has taken an unexpected, but rewarding, turn.

1. Non-Profit Executive Director

I am the executive director of Family Promise of Greater New Braunfels (“FPGNB”) -- a non-profit organization serving homeless families. Previously, I served on FPGNB’s board of directors for several years, and I stepped in as interim executive director when a staff change coincided with my need for a break from traditional lawyering.

I did not expect to be serving in this role for very long. But the COVID-19 pandemic occurred, and FPGNB quickly had to develop and adapt to new ways of serving families facing homelessness.

When I began serving as executive director, I thought I would be taking a clean break from the law, but this did not turn out as expected, either.

2. Problem-Solving Upstream

Running this small non-profit has tested my problem-solving skills more than my previous stints (a) developing software, (b) writing appellate briefs, (c) representing clients in court, and (d) working for an appellate court

I joined FPGNB’s board in 2013 because I was getting tired of helping people when it was too late to do much good. I wanted to direct my attention upstream and to help when it could make more of a difference.

Early on, when I took court-appointed criminal cases, I saw firsthand how the legal system can work against people in poverty. For example, a simple unpaid parking ticket can lead to an arrest and jail time. If the person cannot afford to pay the parking ticket, how can he or she cover the expenses of bail, court costs, probation fees, and lost work? The same is true for failing to maintain automobile insurance.

I saw similar problems that arise in family law cases too. When couples get divorced, there is often a dramatic drop in their standard of living as they try to make two households survive on the same limited income.

3. Families Strained by Major Life Events

Most families come to FPGNB because of a major life event. A job loss, illness, break-up, abuse, or even a car breakdown can be the first domino to fall, leading to a family’s inability to maintain housing. Very often, the family has been couch-surfing with family members or friends, and these relationships quickly become strained under the stress of having too many people in one space.

Cont'd from page 11

4. Families' Rights and Responsibilities

Families are referred to us from school districts, emergency shelters, local churches, and other nonprofits. FPGNB's program is not for everyone. We have high expectations for our clients, and they must be ready to put in the work. Typically, a family stays in our shelter program for 3 or 4 months. Family members continue receiving help through our case management program for a year once they are on their own. This continuing collaboration with a social worker is essential to (a) break the cycle of crisis, (b) help family members develop new skills, and (c) provide access to resources so that the family will not face homelessness again.

5. Particularized Goals for Families

Each family's situation is different, and we work with them to develop goals that suit their lives. The basic pillars to success include (a) budgeting, (b) working full-time, (c) acquiring affordable and reliable childcare, (d) finding affordable housing, and (e) meeting transportation needs. Government programs may help with some of these needs, like childcare and housing. However, these programs are not always available, and it may take months or years for families to begin receiving these benefits. In New Braunfels, we lack public transportation, so helping to ensure that each family has reliable transportation is a crucial part of our program. We have developed a vehicle donation program so that used vehicles can be donated to our families when they are ready to graduate from FPGNB. What might seem like an old car that no one would want can be a life-changer for a family on its own.

6. Prevention Program for Families at Risk

The pandemic forced FPGNB to reduce the number of families in shelter at one time, so we started a prevention program to help families at risk of losing their housing. These families are eligible to receive case management services, just as shelter families do. Most are very eager to learn more about finances and how to plan for their future needs.

7. Families' Legal Needs

My legal training helps me to do my job because all FPGNB clients have legal issues. They may need to file for divorce or child support, address past debts or evictions, clear up tax issues, and plan for future expenses. I can (a) help them determine whether they need an attorney, (b) educate them about what to expect from the legal process, and (c) calm their fears about a scary situation they have been avoiding.

8. Valuable Skill-Building

Maybe law school did not prepare me to be a fundraiser, house painter, volunteer coordinator, event planner, and grant writer. But I have learned how to handle these responsibilities. For example, I have learned how to paint a building in light of a generous grant that IKEA provided to FPGNB. And I am getting better at asking for money because funding is needed to make improvements in families' lives now that can help them for generations to come.

I am as surprised as anyone that what began in part as a diversion from the law has become a solid step on my career path. I know that FPGNB is where I need to be right now. In fact, I cannot imagine doing anything else!

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