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On the Front Lines with HomeFront
by Pia de Jong

Americans like to think of Christmas as a scene from *It's a Wonderful Life*, which runs comfortably nonstop on TV through the holidays. But for some the everyday reality is more like the baby in front of me, wrapped in a crocheted blanket in a plastic bassinet in the nursery of a homeless shelter I am visiting today.

"What a sweet baby," I tell a mother who has just walked into the room. She smiles faintly and looks away from me. She is still a child herself, no older than 15. Around her wrist she wears the same colored rubber bands that my teenage daughter wears.

Then she turns and walks away abruptly, without saying a word to her baby, or staying with him for more than a minute.

"How old is he?" I ask Connie Mercer, the charismatic president of HomeFront of Mercer County, who has been showing me around. "Just a few days," she says.

The boy has scaly red spots on his face. They look like bug bites. He is sleeping deeply, occasionally twitching his nostrils. I can not take my eyes away from him. His baby face so serious, so fragile. He has the misty quality only newborns have, as if they are not quite landed on earth, still floating somewhere in-between worlds.

Outside the rain is glazing the windows with a slick sheen. In the day-care room I hear "Joy to the World" playing as a toddler builds a shaky tower of wooden blocks. But the newly arrived baby sleeps through everything.

HomeFront, the human services center that offers a warm and dry refuge to this mother and her new baby, is in a former weapons depot on an old Navy base near the Mercer County Airport. But with both private and public donations the concrete bomb shelter has been converted to a new family shelter. With a total of 1,200 volunteers in their various facilities scattered around Central New Jersey, Homefront provides housing, food, training and support for 450 people on any given night.

Today the cafeteria is busy with people who for the moment do not quite fit into society, who have drawn the wrong card, are sent away from work or home, are abandoned, or addicted. None of them has a safety net. They often have no family, no home, no piggybank. They fell but could not get up. Many of them glance away when they see me.

Homefront offers all of them a second chance. It is their living room, their kitchen, their bed, their family.

In the U.S., it is often considered a disgrace to be poor, as if people have just made a bad choice or not worked hard enough. There is criticism of the people who help them. They are thought to be prolonging the problem and wasting the public's money. Just let the poor take care of themselves, the opinion goes.

Connie Mercer shakes her head. "We're always begging for money," she says. "For food, heating, clothing, medical care. If this baby boy were a puppy, the money would flow in. People give more money to homeless animals than to homeless children. They don't blame the puppies but for some reason they blame the children."

The newborn baby I am looking at has drawn all the cards that, at least statistically, can lead to homelessness. He is black, he has a teenage mother with no high-school degree, apparently no father in the picture, and no support system from an extended family.

"What's his name?" I ask the mother when she comes back to retrieve a forgotten plastic bag.

She whispers a name that sounds like "Emanuel," as she lays the back of her hand against his cheek. His eyelids flutter, like butterfly wings in a breeze.

"Emanuel," I repeat to myself as I go home. "Sweet boy, I wish you a wonderful life. Against the odds."

Pia de Jong is a Dutch novelist who lives in Princeton. With editorial help from Lanny Jones. To contribute to Homefront visit www.homefrontnj.org/Donate.cfm

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