

PROFILE OF HOPE:

Brenda's story is one of hardship and instability. Instead of being handed the tools to build a stable life, she was burdened with bad credit by age 15. In desperation, her mom used her social security number to turn on the utilities, and Brenda has suffered the consequences ever since. Brenda wasn't taught to flourish and pursue goals, but to survive on the razor's edge of poverty.

At 17, Brenda had her son JJ. A hard worker, a gentle soul and a loving person, Brenda was also a child raising a child while facing overwhelming obstacles. She did her best to carve out a life, but when JJ was six they lost their housing and came to IOH. It's a common cycle: a single mom, working full-time in a low paying job, falls behind on rent. Late fees pile up and the family is evicted. Housing options then include an extended stay hotel, a friends' floor or the car.

Shortly after coming to IOH, JJ's behavior became cause for concern. Brenda was worried, but didn't know how to advocate for her son. With the support of IOH, Brenda had JJ tested. He was diagnosed with severe ADHD and prescribed medication. Brenda got an IEP in place at school and JJ showed signs of improvement. The family stabilized, Brenda saved as much as possible, and soon it was time to transition to independent living.

Upon graduating the program, Brenda had money in the bank and an improved credit score. They were certainly better off, but high rent in Atlanta led the family to seek housing in Floyd County, 75 miles away. Pulling JJ out of his school and leaving their support system behind was a major blow. As our cities become increasingly unaffordable, low-income families are forced into the suburbs, far from their work and resources.

Brenda has maintained private housing without government assistance - a huge accomplishment in itself. But JJ was struggling in school again and Brenda didn't have a support system in Floyd County. She called her 'family' at IOH, knowing that Deborah Walker-Little, Executive Director, had her back. Deborah listened, encouraged, prayed and connected Brenda with an education professional in her area. Over the next few weeks and with guidance, Brenda navigated the complicated process of updating JJ's IEP. With support services in place, JJ's school situation is much improved.

This family illustrates the power of community and connections. It highlights the lack of decent affordable housing for hardworking poor people. It reminds us that increased bank balances and credit scores are just one piece of the puzzle. Equally important is convincing an exploited and discarded person that their life has value. Offering dignity and empowerment without judgement is crucial, and infinitely more complex than teaching someone how to budget. And when the two things happen simultaneously, the cycle is broken and miracles occur.