

How has Family Promise of Barry County helped me? The short answer, most could assume is that Family Promise gave me shelter when my children and I were experiencing homelessness, and you'd be right. There is so much more to my story and the stories of every family that stays with Family Promise.

I have lived the last 8 years in an abusive, violent home. Last fall I had an opportunity to escape my abuser. It was raining and cold, I was 7 months pregnant and had my 3-year-old son with me. Leaving meant I didn't have a vehicle anymore, so we walked in the rain. I didn't have the ability to pack anything to bring with us because that would have given my plan to leave away, so we left with nothing but the clothes we were wearing. We were able to stay a couple days with my parents before heading to a domestic violence shelter. We spent roughly a week there when my case manager told me about Family Promise of Barry County. She knew I needed to be closer to my support system and that FPBC would be a better fit for us. I called and was able to come to shelter with FPBC just a few days later. I was terrified of everything; I hadn't overseen my own life for so long and every decision felt like the weight of the world. I struggled with my mental and physical health, my son struggled with the changes, and I was overwhelmed, so we kept to ourselves, we stayed small and quiet and hidden. I had a high-risk pregnancy and after about a month staying with FPBC my trips to the emergency room were becoming more frequent. I started having contractions at 28 weeks and was admitted to the hospital, finding that my blood pressure was extremely high. Once I was discharged the decision was made that it was necessary to stay with family until after I had delivered. I was travelling an hour away twice a week for non-stress tests with my OB. Baby almost always failed these, so we had just as many ultrasounds, I had too much fluid, her cord was around her neck, she was big and with every appointment it seemed we were finding more and more to be concerned about. The decision was made to schedule a c-section at 37 weeks for the safety of both of us. Shortly after thanksgiving the most beautiful, sweet and perfect baby girl was born weighing 7lbs 4oz, the same as her big brother. Within minutes of her birth, she was taken to the NICU because she was unable to keep her oxygen levels stable. After 30 hours she was finally stable enough to be with me again and after 3 nights in the hospital we were able to return to my parent's house. Shortly after being discharged from the hospital, I began noticing little things here and there that my gut told me were not normal infant behaviors. Every couple of days we had appointments with the pediatrician, this went on for weeks. No matter what we tried she just couldn't gain weight. For 6 weeks after her birth, I did everything the Dr told me to, we kept feeding journals and set alarms. We tried every combination of nursing and formula and yet she still had not gotten back to her birth weight. Every night I spent terrified to fall asleep, that she might be gone when I woke up. My mental and physical health were steadily declining every day. I felt so hopeless and alone desperately trying to get my baby to turn the corner and start gaining rather than watching her slowly wilt away. One night shortly after the new year she began vomiting and was extremely lethargic. I was so scared that this was the beginning of the end for my sweet girl. I rushed her to the Emergency room at the children's hospital, within minutes of being there I was told they would be admitting her. I was scared but I also had renewed hope that we would finally figure out how to help her. The first night of her admission fear of the possibility that the answers I sought would not have offered a solution. The thought that I could very possibly lose my child was more than I could handle, and I completely broke down. After 4 days in the hospital, numerous specialists, imaging and testing, were given several diagnoses and a treatment plan. My baby was FINALLY back up to her birth weight and was able to come home! My joy was short lived as we tried to settle into a routine and start

living a normal life. With my daughter now making some progress the flood gates of my mind opened and all the trauma of the life we left was at the forefront. Once again, I was completely overwhelmed and exhausted. My mind couldn't take it anymore and despite my best efforts I knew I was in a mental health crisis. I remembered the social worker at the children's hospital telling me about the mother and baby program at Pine Rest, so I did some research and got set up to start the program. Over the next couple months, it seemed like every time things started to look better life would throw me another curve ball. I was quickly headed back to crisis and began to ask God, what did I do so wrong that my punishment should be to watch my children suffer? During this time, I was admitted to the mother and baby program 3 times.

My family returned to FPBC just a few days after my daughter's discharge from the hospital. Some of the most difficult and stressful events of my life happened while I was homeless and staying with FPBC. I truly don't know how I ever would have made it through any of this without the abundance of kindness, love and support of the staff and volunteers at FPBC. Throughout my time in shelter, I have always had someone to talk to, people to share accomplishments with, shoulders to cry on, someone to simply sit with so I didn't feel alone. Staff kept me focused on the goals I had set for myself and went above and beyond countless times. Volunteers became like extended family, always excited for updates on the kids and offering genuine encouragement to keep moving us forward. Through FPBC I have learned about and utilized many community resources I never knew were available before. The FPBC family of staff, host churches and volunteers have enabled me to have every need met while encouraging me every step of the way. I cannot express the gratitude I have for everyone who has crossed paths with my family. Whether it's volunteering, making a meal, donating items or donating funds, none of it goes unnoticed or unappreciated. As a graduate of FPBC I will continue to be involved as much as I can. I never could have imagined that there was any way that I could have made it this far. I am forever so grateful to FPBC, and every person involved for giving me the grace, love, support and resources to reach my dream for my family. My family has been with FPBC for 8 months. In that time my family has been through some of the most difficult moments of our lives, yet through the hard times I have met and been supported by some of the most wonderful people. I have made lifelong friendships and learned the most valuable lessons.

There is so much more to a person's story, and so much more that FPBC does than simply providing shelter for a family experiencing homelessness. Unfortunately, stories like mine are more common than we think, FPBC is an excellent resource for families and with help from such a loving and supportive community there are so many more families whose stories will have a much more positive path.

This week I will get the keys to the first safe home my children have ever known. I have been blessed beyond measure.