



Though its mission and services have expanded, The Nest has always made providing a safe haven for children a priority. Pictured in the PreK classroom are, from left, Lucas, Molly, Rosie, Carli, Carson, Mohammad, and Camden.

Family Matters

THE NEST PROVIDES A SAFE HAVEN FOR WOMEN, CHILDREN,
AND FAMILIES IN CRISIS IN CENTRAL KENTUCKY

By William Bowden | Photos by Joseph Rey Au

Kim McGuire well remembers the first day she brought her then-2-year-old son, Josh, to The Nest — Center for Women, Children, and Families. Anxious to find affordable child care while she looked for a steady job, she turned to the center in a time of stress for her family.

“Josh was upset and crying when I dropped him off, and I was crying too,” she said. “That first day was so sad. It was bittersweet for both of us.”

Two years later McGuire has a full-time job with benefits at Goodwill Industries, and Josh eagerly looks forward to his days at The Nest. “Josh now runs to the door to push the button to let us in,” his mother said. “He’s such a different little boy now. He’s very happy.”

McGuire pays the center for Josh’s care on a sliding scale based on income. That financial break, combined with the freedom the child care gave her to seek a rewarding job, has put her in a stable position. “Had I not found this place, I would still be stuck with a part-time job,” she said. “They have turned our whole life around.”

● ● ● Keeping children safe

Some, like McGuire, come to The Nest because of financial hardships or just the stress of being a single parent. More than half of the women, however, come to escape the more threatening situation of domestic violence and keep their children safe. The center was founded in 1977 and originally operated as two organizations, the Lexington Child Abuse Council and the Women’s Center of Central Kentucky. They eventually merged to become The Nest, which is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year.

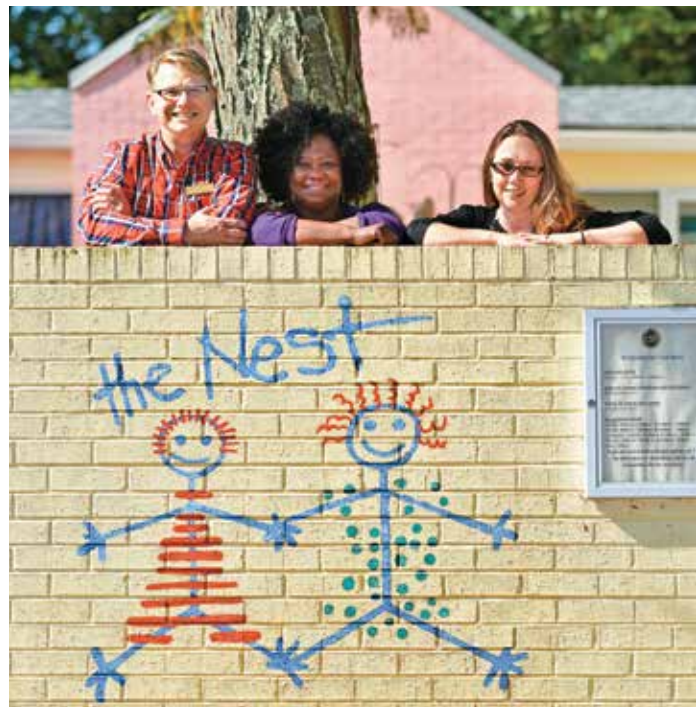
Children are the truly helpless victims in domestic violence situations. They have rights just like adults but are powerless to protect themselves. From its very beginning, The Nest has held the prevention of child abuse and neglect to be a sacred mission.

“When we first opened, the main goal was to be a safe haven,” said Jenny Norman, director of child care services. “You could show up here and take a break from whatever stress you were undergoing. You knew your kids would be in a safe environment. Although we’ve expanded greatly and added many services, preventing child abuse, or abuse of any kind, still underlies all of our programs.”

The center operates as a private nonprofit organization. The majority of services are free, thanks to generous support from foundations, corporations, individual donors, and the center’s own extensive fundraising efforts. The Lexington-Fayette Urban County Government provides some child care funds, the state of Kentucky gives parenting program support, and the federal government has grants for domestic violence initiatives.



Blair Bush, lead teacher in the PreK program, makes learning fun for her kids, some of whom are dealing with upsetting family situations.



Staff members shown at the entrance to The Nest are Jeffrey White, executive director; Sheri Estill, director of crisis care; and Jenny Norman, director of child care services.

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FEATHERING THE NEST



Volunteer Mitzi Adams created this colorful rock garden to honor caregivers.

● ● ● It was just a scraggly, weedy, muddy patch of ground near the entrance to The Nest that no one gave a second thought to. No one, that is, except Mitzi Adams.

Adams, who volunteers at the center two days a week, envisioned a colorful rock garden with painted stones symbolizing the care families receive at The Nest. Her vision became a reality, and now the colored stones, painted by each woman and child who comes to the center, are slowly turning the serpentine pathway from gray into a rainbow of colors. A sign in the garden has an inspirational saying taken from *Only One You*, a children's book: "There is only one you in this great big world. Make it a better place."

"To me, it's a visual tribute to the workers here who touch the lives of the people who come into The Nest," Adams said. A retired school teacher, she enlisted the help of her husband and sons to install the garden, with materials donated by Landscaper's Corner.

Adams is among the more than 1,300 people who volunteer at The Nest each year. She has helped with A Night for The Nest fundraiser, again called on her family to build cubbies for kids in child care, and helped with Dr. Seuss Night. She is the liaison with Lexington Catholic High School, where her youngest son attends, for students who want to volunteer at the center.

"As part of my volunteering, I feel like it's my mission to tell others about The Nest," Adams said. "This place has touched my heart, and it's where I felt I needed to be."

Community support for The Nest takes many forms. Keeneland involves the children in its Keeneland Kids Club by asking them to bring toys and wrapping materials to the club's annual holiday party for donation to The Nest's Reindeer Express program. The race course also donates use of its Phoenix Room during the spring race meet for The Nest to hold a fundraising luncheon.

"Jeffrey White (The Nest's executive director) told me that last year, because of the donations from Keeneland Kids Club members, The Nest was able to give close to 800 children a Christmas they will always remember," said Kara Heissenbittel, director of employee and patron experience at Keeneland. "We want to teach the children the value of giving at an early age. It shows how Keeneland incorporates philanthropy into everything we do."

Clark Material Handling Company was a major sponsor of A Night for the Nest, the center's largest annual fundraising event. Held in August at Normandy Farm, the gala featured a dinner, dance, and silent auction. The company gives its employees 16 hours off work annually to take part in volunteer activities. Many choose to support The Nest by reading to the children.

"The Nest is one of our favorite volunteer activities," said Alan Sutherland, public relations manager at Clark. "The work they do there is very impressive. It's really one of a kind, and we love to be a part of it."



Kim McGuire and her son, Josh, 4, found a home at The Nest during a time of stress in their lives.

Those services range from the immediate and temporary — providing a week's worth of diapers and shampoo to a single parent struggling to make ends meet, for example — to comprehensive, long-range programs in early childhood education, parent education, domestic violence counseling, and courtroom advocacy for victims.

The Nest served more than 1,600 survivors of domestic violence in 17 Central Kentucky counties during its past fiscal year. Total number of people served in all programs was 4,000, including 191 children in child care. The organization's full-time staff attorney represented approximately 500 individuals in family court proceedings.

"Our purpose is to give children a chance, victims a voice, and families a future," said executive director Jeffrey White, who oversees a professional staff of 16. "We are a grassroots, 100 percent local organization dedicated to helping families achieve healthy lifestyles and become self-sufficient."

● ● ● It's a start

Even little things that are routine for most people can be a crisis when your life is in turmoil because of economic hardships, or domestic violence. Sheri Estill, director of crisis care, is on the frontline when it comes to allay-



The Nest is housed in the 1810 Federal-style William Morton House on North Limestone Street in Lexington. Acquired by the city in 1913, the building's grounds now make up Duncan Park.

ing the stress these women feel and getting them on the road to handling their problems.

She first makes sure they get the immediate things they need, from diaper wipes to finding a solution for rent that's due. She oversees a stockpile of donated children's clothing and other items that are carefully sorted and stored for immediate use.

Her department also helps with referrals for financial assistance, housing, and employment.

Along with crisis care, each person gets some encouragement from Estill to look for longer-term solutions to their concerns. "A lot of people just need some guidance," she said. "If I see an articulate, capable person, I ask them, 'Why aren't you going for the

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team leader job where you work? Or the customer service job?’ I want to help get them out of the box they’re in.”

Children are usually part of the equation The Nest is dealing with. The organization built its early reputation on free drop-in, respite child care to help mothers who were just stressed out or needed to attend family court. As time went by, the center added a limited number of long-term contract slots for children such as Josh McGuire. The Nest can handle up to 26 children daily in its infant, toddler, and PreK classrooms.

When Norman, who started at The Nest as a teacher, says the center provides care for children from birth to 5 years old, she means exactly that. “We once received a 4-day-old baby directly from the hospital,” she said. “The mother was deemed

not fit to have immediate custody, so an aunt intervened and brought her to us for temporary care.”

Education is a vital part of the child care program. “We are not just a babysitting service; we’re an early childhood learning center,” said White. “We prepare them for kindergarten so they’re on the same level as other children enrolled in preschool programs.” This service recently earned a 5 STAR rating — the highest possible — from the Kentucky ALL STARS Tiered Quality Rating and Improvement System, a voluntary state-run program that assesses child care programs.

Blair Bush is the lead teacher in the PreK program for children ages 3½ to 5. Her colorful classroom has a warm and welcoming appearance that helps the children adapt to what has often been a jolting situation in their lives.

“The children handle it differently,” Bush said. “Some are in a stable mood, but others may lash out because they’re scared; they’ve been traumatized. One kid had witnessed his mom being strangled repeatedly. He was removed from the home and at first would just shut down.”

Bush thinks that dealing with especially upset children is her forte and a task she actually looks forward to. “When a child comes in and I know he’s been through it, he’s mine. That’s who I want. I honestly wouldn’t know how to cope with a normal child care center. It would seem too calm for me.”

● ● ● Dealing with the dark side

The Nest is a cheerful, upbeat place with the sounds of lively children expressing their exuberance. Colorful artwork lends a fun feel to the place. But the dark side of what brings the mothers and children here is the domestic violence and child abuse that lie behind many of the cases. “Domestic violence is an issue of power and control,” said Katie Mooney, director of domestic violence and parent-

ing programs. “Our focus here is helping people identify that they have the power and strength to get out of the abusive situation.”

The intake process helps determine the person’s immediate safety. Their financial situation can also be a pressing concern, as victims of abuse are often dependent on the perpetrator. The center has two full-time domestic violence counselors who help the victims work through their problems and address their state of mind. “They’ve been told they’re worthless,” Mooney said. “We want to help them rebuild their self-esteem and function independently.”

One way The Nest helps in this regard is through an innovative art therapy program that Mooney directs. “It’s a workshop that helps people who have experienced trauma,” she said. “The healing is in the art they produce. Sometimes it hits so close to home that it’s hard for them to complete the piece. But there is also a relaxing aspect to working on the art.”

Domestic violence situations often become a legal matter. The Nest employs two victim advocates who attend domestic violence dockets in family court, along with a full-time attorney to represent victims in protective order hearings.

“The protective order is that first step of a victim coming out and saying, ‘I want this to stop,’ ” said attorney Hunter Hickman. “Even in cases where they don’t meet the strict legal standards, they’ve gotten in touch with our resources, and they know they don’t have to live in an abusive relationship. I got into the legal profession to help the underserved, and The Nest provided that opportunity.”

The center also has a parenting education program that includes skills assessment, curriculum-based courses, and self-help support groups. When children are removed from the home, the parents may be court-ordered to take a parenting class, which can be satisfied by the center’s 12-week course.



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Katie Mooney, left, director of domestic violence and parenting programs, and Patricia Acosta, bilingual domestic violence court advocate, view client artwork in the art therapy room.

“Our Parent Cafes are support groups that meet at night and give the parents an outlet for their emotions,” White said. “If your child has been taken away from you, you might be in denial. Some are physically sick over what has happened.”

● ● ● *A holistic approach*

The Nest has grown partly through partnering with other organizations. GleanKY is a charitable group that gathers and redistributes excess fresh fruits and vegetables. It makes a stop every Wednesday at The Nest, when families are given bags of groceries to take home. Among other groups the center has working relationships with are GreenHouse17, a domestic violence shelter for Fayette County; the Bluegrass Rape Crisis Center; and the Community Action Council, which offers free resumé writing classes and GED programs.

This all adds up to a holistic approach to helping families through crisis situations in all areas of their lives. It encourages them to overcome the idea of helplessness and dependency that brought them to the center. To fly the nest, so to speak.

“We’re not just a Band-Aid; we are a stepping-stone to a better life,” Bush said. “We don’t enable them to continue being dependent; we want them to stand on their own two feet and succeed. I had one of my moth-

ers become so excited when she got off food stamps and was able to start paying for part of her child care here. She was so proud of herself.”

Just as Kim McGuire used The Nest to help straighten out her life, so did Ritha Muhammad and her daughters, Zuri, 10, and Rianna, 7. A disease that caused Muhammad to have seizures resulted in a premature birth with Zuri. The children’s father lost his job, and she was in need of affordable daycare. After she overcame the seizures, she had to relearn her job. She now holds a responsible position as a vocational rehabilitation counselor with the Kentucky Career Center, and her girls are doing well in school. They no longer need to come to The Nest, but it’s always in their memories.

“Anytime you receive one service, they assist with something else,” Muhammad said. “We love The Nest. They’re our family. I would recommend them to anybody.”

Children are hard to fool; they know a loving, caring attitude when they see it. The Nest has engendered strong feelings in some of its youngest clients, including Zuri and Rianna. Maybe that’s the best testimony to the good this remarkable organization, its staff and volunteers, have accomplished for so many years.

“Every time we drive near The Nest, my girls beg me to stop so they can go in and say hello to Miss Jenny [Norman],” Muhammad said. “They have such fond memories of the time they spent there. It became a second home to us, and I will be eternally grateful for that.” **KM**



Ritha Muhammad, with her daughters, Rianna, 7, left, and Zuri, 10, got a helping hand from The Nest when they needed one.

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