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Families in recovery gain a safe outdoor space

By Print

There's a yard off Black Street. It's two empty lots that now have a few play things and a bench that encircles a lush old shade tree.

That yard is a safe place to play for children whose moms are in recovery.

And if the pandemic taught us anything, it is the value of spending time outdoors.

East Liberty-based Sojourner House, which provides housing and treatment for substance abuse and mental health issues, owns the lots. Together, they create a large lawn and while there is some play equipment, it doesn't have a covered shelter there for activities and educational programming while participants are protected from the rain or the sun.

Recently, it also had old, outdated play equipment that needed to be removed.

"We partnered with the Rotary Club: Shout out to the Rotary Club," De'netta Benjamin-Miller, the executive director of Sojourner House and Sojourner House MOMS, said. "They came out. They helped us really tear down old equipment that was in MOMS

Green. They also are helping us with some of the planning initiatives for MOMS-Green."

Now that the old equipment is removed, the organization wants to build a shelter, a quiet area for kids to learn, and put in more extensive landscaping.

Benjamin-Miller said the pandemic taught the staff of Sojourner House and its sister organization, Sojourner MOMS, about resilience, "but also being careful not to be too resilient. So we learned that it's important to check in with each other to make sure that we're not being too resilient and not being able to recognize when we're burnt out or overwhelmed."

She added that was not just for the staff.

"Some of our clients are super resilient and some of them look like they are OK, but they're not. Inside they are struggling."

Early in the pandemic, she said: "We also learned the importance of the outdoors. When the children were being home-schooled, it was so important to have that space so they could go outside and get grounded in the grass."

The outdoor area also gave families the space they needed to see other families, yet remain socially distanced. It broke the isolation of the pandemic while people were supposed to stay apart, yet craving community.

At any given time, the three- to six-month treatment program, Sojourner House, generally has 14 women, each living with their children in the program's apartments.

"The treatment program is not considered housing," Benjamin-Miller said. Sojourner House MOMS is a separate housing program. If there is room, families can move into the Sojourner House MOMS transitional housing program, which has apartments for a dozen mothers with their children, but, since they are not considered homeless, they do not qualify for the organization's permanent supportive housing. The permanent housing, which receives funding from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, has apartments for 34 families, each for up to five years.

In the treatment program, Benjamin-Miller noted, "Not only are we helping a mom with her substance abuse issues, but also we are helping a child dealing with the adjustment of



Photos courtesy of Sojourner House

Members of the Greater Pittsburgh Rotary Club turned out on two Saturdays to help to clean up MOMS Green in East Liberty for Sojourner House.

having a parent again."

With all the housing programs, at any given time the Sojourner House programs are housing up to 60 families in seven buildings, which was what they were doing when the pandemic struck.

Throughout it all, Benjamin-Miller noted, the staff was there.

"They showed up through Covid. They came to work," she said. During the shut down, the staff of Sojourner House, using personal protective equipment, made sure the families were taken care of, even when clients were sick.

"They did their best to keep everybody safe and not once did they complain," she said of the staff. "So I am proud of their service."

While the programs receive support from Homeless Children's Education Fund, The Grable Foundation, Pittsburgh Penguins Foundation, and local Presbyterian churches, the organization is always in need of volunteers and donations.

To help with the MOMS Green project, go to the organization's website sojournerhousepa.org and scroll down to the section "Making a difference" where you can



Caroline Madigan, who has volunteered at Sojourner House for several years, paints the tire steps at MOMS Green.



The 3-year-old daughter of a Sojourner House client studies how to climb down a hill of tires. volunteer time, donate money or buy items off the organization's Amazon wish list.