

BATTLE CREEK shopper NEWS

Thursday, March 10, 2022
1001 E. Columbia Avenue
Battle Creek, MI 49014
Phone (269) 965-3955 • FAX 968-8586
www.TheBattleCreekShopper.com
shopper@j-adgraphics.com



"The People
Papers"



Published by J-Ad Graphics, Inc.
(269) 945-9554 • 1351 N. M-43 Highway • Hastings, MI 49058-0188



This publication
printed on 50%
recycled paper



**DAYLIGHT
SAVING TIME
BEGINS**

SUNDAY MARCH 13th

Goodwill of Central Michigan's Heartland: Family Steps to Success program works (See one woman's story, inside)



Single mom gets back on her feet thanks to the Goodwill family success program

Shelly Kehrle-Sulser
Executive Editor

In the span of six months, Antonia “Toni” Alexander went from living jobless at a homeless shelter without a car to now having her own apartment, job and vehicle.

And, she did it on her own by tapping into a local network of resources that gave her guidance and a hand up along the way.

The process was set in motion when Dawn Dean of the Goodwill Central Michigan Heartland’s (CMH) Financial Opportunity Center (FOC) visited the Inasmuch House shelter at the Haven of Rest to speak with residents about financial literacy.

“I go out into the community, we teach classes, we have a relationship with the

Haven,” said Dawn at the downtown Battle Creek office where she has worked for 11 years. “We get referrals from other agencies of people who need help with finances and jobs. My job is all financial literacy. Teaching, writing curriculum, handling coaching sessions, establishing those relationships. I’ve done it for 10 years.”

That was last July.

The next day, Toni, 27, was at the door of the FOC with her two children, aged 5 and 18 months, and has been with them ever since.

Toni said she had returned to Michigan last summer from Phoenix, where she was also homeless, to try and make a fresh start.

“And I didn’t have anywhere to go,” said Toni, now a literacy tutor at LaMora



Toni Alexander, left, talks with Family Steps to Success Program Manager Janice Chapman who guided her from homelessness to independence. (Shopper News photo by Shelly Kehrle-Sulser)

Park Elementary School while she works to earn her child care certificate at Kellogg Community College. “I was just moving back here and so I stayed with my kids’ grandma for a while and then I was working on starting over and getting myself together. So I called the Inasmuch house and they had room for me so July 12, 2021, I did my intake for Inasmuch and we were homeless at that point.”

The shelter’s case workers require the adults to attend meetings where they can glean information about how to become self-sufficient.

That’s where she heard about the Goodwill Family Steps to Success program, led by Program Manager Janice Chapman.

“So I called Janice and told her I heard Dawn’s presentation at Inasmuch and I was interested,” said Toni, “‘can we set up a time?’ And the next day, I walked down here with my kids and we talked about everything. My barriers, my goals, what I see myself doing in the next few months and stuff.”

with immediate financial needs in addition to what Dawn does, she also becomes a mentor, a guide and a connector.

“We have a lot of support systems,” explained Goodwill CMH CEO Ken Bauer. “We can reach out to a lot of organizations. Community Action, Michigan Works, Neighborhoods, Inc., there’s a variety of organizations that hire people because they’ve been in their jobs so long, understand that we

can’t provide every support but also know where those are in the community so we can help direct individuals to the right place so it becomes a cumulative response, solving multiple barriers at once.”

For instance, not only did Janice give Toni a hand up with daycare, transportation, insurance and rental expenses, she guided her to more self-sufficiency.

Continued on page 4

SINGLE MOM Continued from page 2

“It is a fantastic program,” said Janice. “I want the parent, with children between the ages of zero to 17, so, if they’re in school – I want that parent, if they don’t have that high school diploma or GED, I want them to work on that. I want the parent to go and get a certificate if they already have a high school diploma and don’t have any higher education. Or, has started their education and is pretty close to finishing so I want to help them finish that. Again, the supports, resources are the thing to help them do that.”

While Janice was working with Toni and her six or seven other program participants, she was also contacting other agencies that could step in with additional resources, she said.

“Overall, I think we’re a very collaborative organization,” said Ken Bauer. “When people come to us, they’re not just getting Goodwill services, they’re getting the experience of our people who can say, ‘you need this’ and we know how to reach out to the other organizations in the community that provide those services, so, it’s a collaborative process to take a more holistic approach to solving someone’s problems.”

Since Goodwill CMH no longer operates the Wheels to Work program that accepts donated vehicles, Janice called a contact at Michigan

Works!

“I have a truck,” said Toni. “I signed up with Neighborhood Hubs which, they’re like Michigan Works and Community Action and Woman’s Co-op. It’s a partnership of agencies, they have this program where they do a car purchase for you up to \$4,000 and you just have to pay the tax because they’re non-profit.”

According to Toni, the requirement is that “you need to be a program member for three months and you just have to be an active participant. I did the three months. She’s like ‘we’re going to go ahead and do the car purchase’ and I just had to go around town and find a vehicle within that budget because I didn’t have any money to put with that myself.”

And now, she owns a 2002 Ford Explorer, Eddie Bauer, (no relation to Ken Bauer) edition.

“The official car purchase was Nov. 4 and they even paid for the down payment and first month for car insurance,” said Toni, “so I was able to walk off the lot with it that same day and it’s so much easier to get around.”

In addition, Toni had been looking for housing since the beginning, said Janice.

“Housing is very difficult to find right now,” said Janice. “It is very difficult. Like she said, she tapped into all the different agencies

and looking through the Shopper. She had a really good prospect and it fell through.

“I could see that was a little bit wearing on her,” Janice continued, “but I go like, ‘well, we can’t give up. We’ve come so far now.’”

Finally, the Neighborhoods, Inc. was able to connect her with a landlord.

“And it was the last apartment that they had available and she got that apartment,” said Janice.

Toni, who was by then staying temporarily with her mother in Pennfield Township, said she had obtained a limited time voucher from Michigan State Housing and Urban Development.

“This was all on a deadline,” said Toni, “because with a voucher, you get 60 days plus two extensions which is a total of 120 days, so, I had the first extension, back in November. I had a prospect but it fell through. I was pushing a deadline, I got it extended again through December and then I didn’t find anything and January came and I got until Jan. 21 and was getting nervous and I’m like, ‘it’s getting close.’”

But on her birthday, on Jan. 10, it all finally fell into place.

“I was able to send out my application and she ran and did everything and she approved me that same week,” said Toni of the land-



Financial literacy coach Dawn Dean, left, spoke at the Inasmuch House last July when Toni Alexander (right) was a resident at the Battle Creek homeless shelter. Toni took her message to heart and is now living independently. (Shopper News photo by Shelly Kehrle-Sulser)

lord, “and I just had to go through (the Section 8 voucher) and they had to go and do their inspections and we got it all done before Jan. 21.”

And, now, she is working to clinch her Child Development Associate® (CDA) Credential™ thanks to a W.K. Kellogg Foundation “Pathways” grant to Community Action.

That course study required her to leave her job at Goodwill Feb. 25 and she has since started her paid internship at LaMora Park.

Through it all, Janice said Toni never asked for any money and always put in the work to achieve her goals.

“I watched this young lady hit roadblock after roadblock. And, I did not want to add to that,” said Janice. “I wanted to go, like, ‘okay.’ I told her, ‘I’m going to stick in here with you.’ I kept telling her ‘you’re going to be my story.’ Because, everybody needs to know, just because a person is homeless or are in poverty, this, that or the other, doesn’t mean they don’t want better or want more.

“It’s just sometimes life just knocks you back.”

Toni admits that there were many tears, some anger and some frustration along the way, as well as an enormous amount of paperwork.

“I’m the type of person that if I feel like something is completely overwhelming, I’ll just procrastinate and keep putting it off,” said Toni. “I’ll push it away and not want to deal with it. But, with her mentorship, I learned a lot and I was able to break a lot of bad habits so I’m really grateful for the growth in that. I’m excited for 2022.”

In her free time, to give back to Goodwill, Toni now volunteers as a tax preparer with the Goodwill VITA

(Volunteer Income Tax Assistance) program that helps low income people file their tax returns.

“She doesn’t sit around

and twiddle her thumbs,” said Janice. “She wants to do things and she’s giving back and all that kind of stuff. I’m very proud of her.”