



## WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT: Mary's Success Story

On a quiet street sits a small home with a big story. Built in 1910, the home has seen many alterations, and it's now the sight of a powerful transformation – the transformation of the life of Mary.

"It's surreal for me," Mary said. "6 years ago, I was living in my car not sure what I was going to do. Now I'm able to watch my grandbabies learn to play piano in my own home. All of you at St. Vincent de Paul have been such a help all these years, I cannot say thank you enough."

A senior citizen, Mary, found herself homeless and living in her car in 2016. Prior to that, she lived on a fixed income (SSI and Disability), Mary could not afford to keep up with local rental increases. She found herself forced from her home and in need of help. Faced with the reality of having to find work once more, a friend told Mary about the Workforce Development Program at St. Vincent de Paul.

"I've lived a fairly hard life," Mary said. "I come from a broken home, and there were just certain things I never learned because when I was younger, you didn't need to know them to find work. At St. Vincent de Paul, they showed me how to do things I had never done before, like make a resume. It was a lot of work, but it was worth it, I was determined to turn my life around and they were there to help me."

Mary is currently working as an Advanced Medical Care Specialist with the Department of Veteran's Affairs, helping care for the Country's veterans. She currently commutes about two hours from her home to her job. While Mary said the commuting situation is not ideal, she said it is more than worth it to own a home.

The WFD program at St. Vincent de Paul is a hybrid job-training and work-experience program. Participants in the program receive paid part time work in an SVdP thrift store and receive classroom instruction on a variety of life-skill and job-skill related topics. The classes are taught entirely by SVdP volunteer mentors who wish to help others learn the skills they need to thrive and succeed in the modern workforce.

Mary's mentor in the WFD program, Gail, said she is extremely proud of Mary.

"It's an amazing transformation," Gail said. "It really touches my heart to see Mary able to take care of herself and enjoy herself and have some stability. She deserves it and it's rewarding to be a part of her story."

WFD program coordinator and community mentor Ron said, "Mary is an incredible woman. She was always so determined to succeed, and having bought her own house this year, it's hard to say she hasn't! We're all incredibly proud of her, and I think she will be an amazing role model and inspiration for future WFD participants."

Mary and SVdP's journey together have been long, but incredibly fruitful. SVdP helped Mary with gasoline and car maintenance while she was living in her car and attending WFD classes. After purchasing her home in October, SVdP also helped Mary with the purchase of furniture for her home. Mary said the help she received was invaluable, and it was motivating to know that there were people who wanted her to succeed.

"I just want to let people who are struggling know that it's possible," Mary said. "You can get through it. You can find a job; you can buy a house. It's going to be hard, it's going to be a long road, but it's possible and the people at St. Vincent de Paul helped me see that."

Mary was born in Michigan but raised in Buffalo, New York. Mary said when she was young, she lost both her mother and her father. She said she was unsure of what to do with herself, so she went to school. Mary became pregnant and had two children. She said the realities of being a single mother soon replaced some of the dreams and ideas she had for her future. Looking to provide for her family and wanting to start over, Mary moved to the Bay Area after hearing Scott MacKenzie's song "San Francisco."

"I heard that Scott MacKenzie song and I just knew that was where I wanted to be," Mary said. "So, I packed my bags, put some flowers in my hair and off to San Francisco I went."

Mary said her job options were often limited due to her needing to provide for her children on her own. She said there were certain jobs she just could not take because she had to be there for her children and had no one else in her life to rely on for help. "When you're a single mom, at least back then, people didn't really want to work with you," Mary said. "Why deal with your issues when you can hire someone without kids? It was always a struggle to find and keep working. But I was never going to give up, that just isn't me."

Family is extremely important to Mary. She currently has her daughter and her four grandchildren, ages 1, 4, 6- and 9-years old staying with her in her home. She said her daughter is working on finding a more stable living situation, but in the meantime, Mary is enjoying the time with her family.

"When you're living in your car, there's no way to really stop and enjoy the simple things in life," Mary said. "I would spend my day finding a safe place to park, or taking a shower at a local gym where I had a membership. But now I'm able to just enjoy some peace with my family and see my grand babies grow and smile."

Mary said the biggest struggle of having her home filled with her family is her 9-year-old grandson fancies himself a chef.

“He can cook, there’s no doubt,” Mary laughed. “But he lives in that kitchen. If you take him to someone’s home, he makes a beeline for their kitchen. It can be a little much.”

Mary also worked with the Neighborhood Assistance Corporation of America (NACA) to secure a home-loan at reasonable rates despite her rocky financial past. NACA is a non-profit organization based in Oakland, California. NACA’s goal is to build strong, vibrant neighborhoods through affordable homeownership.

Mary’s relationship with St. Vincent de Paul is not over. The SVdP volunteers who have supported her in the past will continue to be a source of support and encouragement as she continues to build her new life in her new home.