

'Caring People' Keep Family Together

By Mae Rhine

A month ago Debbie Rosario was ready to find foster homes for her three young children.

She is homeless after separating — again — from her husband, who she says is an alcoholic. During the past two years, she has left him several times with her children, "but I was never able to get away," she says. "He always knows where I am and brings me home."

She left again a few months ago, but had no place to go. In Middlesex County, where she was living, she was offered a place to sleep at a shelter. But she had to make other arrangements for daytime hours. It was then she decided to stay with friends in High Bridge.

That was working out fine; Ms. Rosario, who is 29, had a job working 3 to 11 p.m. at a deli only a quarter of a mile away. Then one night her children came running into the deli. The man at the house where Ms. Rosario and her children had been staying in High Bridge had attacked her 8-year-old daughter, Jessica.

"He picked her up by the neck and slammed her on the floor," says Ms. Rosario. The man came to the deli a few minutes later, and found police waiting for him.

"He told me if I signed a complaint, don't bother coming back."

Ms. Rosario says she felt bit-



Staff Photo by Karen Servis

HOMELESS Debbie Rosario and son Adam have a warm place to stay this holiday thanks to a group of Hunterdon churches.

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Caring People Provide Shelter And Aid For Hunterdon's Homeless

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ter, explaining "He was wrong and I suffered the consequences."

She had nowhere else to turn. Her family is scattered in New York, Tennessee and Puerto Rico, she says. So she called welfare officials in Middlesex who gave her the phone number of the Interfaith Hospitality Network in Hunterdon.

The Network was formed by nine county churches who "share the responsibility" of offering shelter for homeless people, according to coordinator Darlene Scott. The "shelter" is rotated every week among the churches and a van, leased by the Network, transports the families to the various churches, Mrs. Scott says.

A shelter was "not my first choice," says Ms. Rosario. "I had heard that they were slimy, full of drug addicts."

It was then she considered "just giving up my children," she says. "Here I was, disturbed, ready to lose it."

But she decided to give it a try and "Let me tell you, it is entirely different" from what she thought, Ms. Rosario says. She says she is amazed at the support she has received, not only from the churches, but from her children's school and the general public.

"My daughter Jessica told her classmates that she was living in a shelter," recalls Ms. Rosario. "Well, let me tell you, the principal called me up and said there were moms who wanted to help. I've gotten brand-new pants for the kids, with the price tag still on it."

With a glance at her 5-year-old son, Adam, she whispers, "A few days later, the principal called again and asked me if I would come pick up some g-i-f-t-s for the kids for the holidays."

Also, a local man she knows only as "Buzz" gave Adam a brand-new tricycle, which he happily rides around the shelter when he's not trying to braid his mother's hair.

"If shelters were like this in Middlesex, I'd be there right now," she says.

Ms. Rosario says she and her children "feel like royalty."

They are "served" breakfast, lunch and dinner, she says, adding that program officials "know you're under pressure and they want you to relax."

Ms. Rosario and her children, including 10-



HOMELESS FOR THE HOLIDAYS - Debbie Rosario cuddles with son Adam at a shelter for the homeless. Right, Adam rides a new tricycle donated by a church member.

Staff Photos by Karen Servis

year-old Natalie, are awakened each morning at 6 a.m. "with a cheerful 'Good morning' " she says. "The table's all set and we say grace. Then they'll make lunches" for her children to bring to school. "I've never seen a shelter like this," she says gratefully, adding that "I've gained seven pounds."

Still, she was "feeling a little sad" Sunday night because it's nearly Christmas. But then carolers

appeared and sang to the eight people at the shelter.

"My kids have never seen carolers before," she says. "To see the smile on their face made me happy." And "Santa was here," she adds with a smile toward Adam.

The days at the shelter are long but Ms. Rosario keeps busy by circling ads for jobs and apart-

ments. In the meantime, her children seem happy although Natalie "keeps thinking about her dad and wondering why he is the way he is," Ms. Rosario says.

She adds that program officials are trying to help her find a job and a place to stay. She hopes to stay in the county, explaining, "I'm used to all these caring people in Hunterdon."