

# Friends<sup>to</sup> *friends*

Friends Association for Care and Protection of Children



## EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S CORNER

Dear Friends,

I feel so privileged and excited to have the opportunity to follow in Catherine Friedman's footsteps and serve as your new Executive Director. My first day at the office was on Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service. Dr. King's vision of a beloved community was jumping off the pages of everything I was reading this year. During his life he offered a concept of a beloved community where the powerful spirit of human goodness and compassion would overcome countless social issues such as hunger, homelessness, and poverty. From the moment I walked through the doors of 113 West Chestnut Street I knew in my soul that I was part of a beloved community made manifest.

We are on the front lines, supporting family's battling the effect of poverty and homelessness and working directly with them to stabilize and thrive in permanent housing. And together, with our families, staff, donors and volunteers we are transforming lives and building our beloved community.

Thank you all for the very warm welcome. I am so lucky to be joining a fantastic team and an inspiring community. Please feel free to reach out to us at any time; we are happy to hear from you.

Warmly,

*Jennifer*



*Jennifer & young child*

Jennifer Lopez, Executive Director

## Meet Our New Executive Director

**W**hen Jennifer Lopez joined the Probation and Parole Department of Chester County, her daughter was six months old. "Am I putting myself in danger, what am I getting into?" she thought. The fear soon dwindled. "I have an adventurous spirit...I like new challenges." She accepted the position and went on to become the Deputy Chief of the department.

Now, Jennifer is ready for a new challenge - as the newly-appointed Executive Director of Friends Association. It's been only a couple of weeks since Jennifer came on board and the office space is yet to be completely set up, yet a huge stuffed

rhinoceros sits next to her desk. "I am hoping some families come up here; I want to spend time with them and make them comfortable," she says.

Jennifer has interacted with and already knows some of the client base at Friends. She served on various Decades to Doorways committees where she helped serve homeless populations. "We referred a lot of our women to the programs here at Friends," she says.

Jennifer believes that she has come full circle. Every step in her life, has slowly led her to where she is now, a "part of this 197 year old organization." She adds, "The history of this place, the fact that it was started by Quaker women who saw a need in the community and then figured out a way to provide services... It speaks to me, as a woman."



*Jennifer & Jorge Lopez*

Jennifer was the first in her family to go to college. She explains, "I had a very challenging childhood, so I can relate to a lot of the population that we serve in my job, in probation and at Friends." She then adds, "I would often think, if not for the grace of God, I could have just as easily been on the other side..Part of my journey at the probation office was to heal myself."

About two years ago, Jennifer started to feel a misalignment between her personal values and her job, specifically the incarceration aspect of her work. She began to struggle over the impact the criminal justice system has on our communities. "Most of my career was around creating programs lessening the impact of the system," she says.

She continues, "I think a lot of our vulnerable communities have very fragile ties with each other and with the community, and as a system we disrupt these ties rather than build upon them." She wanted to be part of something that builds those ties. At Friends, she believes she can do that. "I am really drawn to the culture, values and mission, which are congruent with my personal values.

She flips through her journal and reads a quote from A Course in Miracles by Helen Schucman. With a sense of calm, she says, "I feel like I have come here, to this position, to remind us we are interconnected."



*Cleaning a shelter apartment*



TYLER & AMANDA

It's 6 o'clock on a cold December evening, and the moonlight shines softly on Tyler and Amanda's new Subaru parked in front of their Coatesville home. The couple, associated with Friends for more than four years, received the automobile as a donation from a Friends' supporter. "It's not just a car ...it's a beautiful car," says Tyler.

Amanda pacifies her five-month-old baby and quickly pulls out a photo of her four kids snuggled in the backseat of the new car. She says excitedly, "We have never had a car in which the seats got warmed up!" The couple contacted Friends in 2014 when they encountered some financial difficulty and had nowhere to go.

"We were homeless," recalls Tyler. "We contacted several organizations, but nobody was willing to take us as a whole family, and we really wanted to stay together."

"Friends was the only organization that would take us in," adds Amanda.

Indira Vasquez, Outreach Case Manager at Friends, recounts, "When I started working with them, Amanda was six months pregnant and working the night shift at Shoprite supermarket. She returned tired in the mornings, was diabetic, and wasn't going to a doctor for checkups. Her pregnancy was our top priority."

Prioritizing Amanda's health meant ensuring that she obtain adequate rest, which would require Tyler finding employment and getting a driver's license. "Every step was a challenge," Amanda recalls.

Housing was the first step. Moving from a hotel to the Friends shelter, then from the shelter to a three-bedroom house has been a journey in itself. Amanda expresses her appreciation for this home as she recalls previous ones. "It's been three years in this house, and we have never lived this long in any place. It has always been with someone, or at a hotel. So it is nice to go to sleep knowing that you will wake up to this roof, and to not have to uproot your kids from one place to another every so often," she says, and then adds, "This feels like home."

It has been a rough path to get here though, the couple agrees. Tyler and Amanda have been together for 13 years and have worked side jobs at several places during that time. "We never had a job that would enhance our career," explains Amanda. When there was an opening at the West Chester Courthouse for a clerical position, the couple were ready to fight tooth and nail for it. "At first, Tyler was very nervous, because he had never gone for an interview for such an important position. And we didn't want to miss

this opportunity," she explains. The week leading up to the interview, Tyler and Indira prepared answers for probable questions, organized the necessary documents, and mustered up courage. "Indira even took me shopping for appropriate clothes!" Tyler recalls.

May 22nd was a special day for Tyler and Amanda's family. In addition to celebrating his birthday, Tyler received the best gift ever: a new job. "I have never worked in an office setting before. The highest position that I was in was that of a manager at a Philadelphia company. But it was more like a floor associate. Here, it's different. You have to dress appropriately. You have to watch what you say. I had to learn a lot; it's a whole new world," he says. Tyler has proudly given his family a tour of his new workplace - his desk. "I even

have a photo of my son sitting on my chair!" he beams.

Amid the excitement and celebrations over the new job, there was a fresh challenge: the commute. Each day Tyler had to catch the 6:55 a.m. bus to reach the office by 8:30. "Sometimes the bus wouldn't show up at all. In

the evening I would be stuck here after everyone went home because I would have to wait for an hour for the bus," he says. There was just enough time to get his clothes ready for the next day and sleep before repeating the same things over again.

That is, until the Subaru came along. "It's not just a car. It's so much more," stresses Amanda. "We went to my aunt's a few days ago and we hadn't seen family for five years. Also, now I am able to drive to see my 17-year-old son who stays with his father, and who I see on weekends."

Tyler and Amanda have come far but have a long way to go. Tyler was never able to complete his high school education because of a car accident and needed to find work to support his family. "I need to clear my GED (General Education Development Tests), to get better positions at work, and earn more money to support my family. And eventually, move to a better neighborhood," he adds.

Even as Tyler plans for the future, he stops to reflect on his past. "Sometimes you lose track. When you are in a tough situation, you don't see the light at the end

of the tunnel. That is what happened to me. I was using drugs years ago. I was depressed and lost," he remembers. "But there is always goodness at the end. You have to find your way back; you need to remember that you have just one life."



**DID YOU**

*A typical sheltered home comprised of a mother with two children. Needs in these families are*



# Beginnings



**KAYLA** In July of last year, Kayla sat outside the office of Orion Communities, Inc. in Phoenixville, wondering where she would spend the night. She and her one-month-old daughter had nowhere to go. Orion offers case management and a tech resource center. "I refused to leave from outside their office. I wanted to sit in a place where there was enough activity," she says. That day, if not for a call from Friends Association, she would have had to sleep outside on the streets.

Kayla grew up in Philadelphia, "between the Art Museum and the Boulevard". She lived with her mom in Frankford before she moved out in 2017. "I was making a lot of bad decisions and wrong choices, and one by one it started piling up, and my family cut me off completely," she recalls. She takes a moment to look at her partner Austin, who plays with their six-month-old daughter Leesa in the family room at Friends Association. "I contacted many shelters in Philadelphia. It was tough..." her voice trails off as she recounts that phase of her life. "My partner Austin and I had to part ways for a little while; being single and homeless in Philadelphia is tough.

When she became pregnant, Kayla and Austin moved to Phoenixville. They were supported by A Baby's Breath, a private organization which provides temporary housing for pregnant women. As with any temporary housing, the couple could not stay there forever. "After that, we had nowhere to go", she recalls. "So we stayed in a

hotel and would visit Orion's office to use their computers and fax machines."

Meanwhile, Kayla had contacted Connect Points, a program that provides resource recommendations for those facing homelessness or housing insecurity. "Kayla was placed on a list," explains Olivia Fiatoa, Outreach to Homeless Families Case Manager. Options were running out for Kayla and her family. "Suddenly, somebody from Orion called us and told us that Friends was ready to pay for our stay at a hotel. I was like 'thank God!'"

Kayla and her family were given a hotel room before being shifted to the shelter a week later. "We packed everything and came on a Monday morning. I felt so emotional and so great seeing our little space. Now I could have my own bathroom, refrigerator, kitchen, and bedroom. It was our little apartment," she says.

Along with providing a safe place to stay, Friends Association helped Kayla obtain important documents; her social security

card and birth certificate, and even helped her with some legal issues. "I had a bench warrant since 2016 that carried over into 2018, even though I left Philadelphia. I had no way of removing it on my own. Being pregnant, I was afraid to go to the court and remove it, but I didn't want to go to jail, and end up having the baby in prison. Friends helped me get that removed."

Kayla, Austin, and baby Leesa graduated from Friends' Home Program on January 9, 2019 and now live in West Chester. "At first it was unbelievable for me that we had our own place. I would hear people tell me, 'You are not smiling, are you not excited?' Once I got in and we had the key, my partner knew how excited I was. I slept on the floor that night, I didn't want to leave. Austin went back and forth between our new house and the shelter, bringing all our stuff."

Today, Kayla spends her time taking care of Leesa. "We are into [Amazon] Prime videos now. The last one we watched was This Is England; it was good," she says with a smile. During weekends, she travels to Philadelphia to meet her 13-year-old child. She has two other children, 21 and 22 years old.

Her voice takes a serious tone when she talks about the future. "I plan to go back to school, and do a course on drug and alcohol counseling." She continues, "Being homeless can take a lot out of you physically and mentally...but even when everything around you is pointing to the exit door to nowhere, if you still feel that there is one more phone call you can make, one more door you can knock on, go for it. It's just that you have still not found that door that opens your world yet, your secure world. It's mysterious and wonderful!"

**KNOW?**  
Homeless family is in her late twenties  
nearly 50% of children under the age of 5.



## WAYS TO GIVE - HOW YOU CAN HELP

- Raise awareness that the need for shelter exceeds availability
- Stigma busting: many people facing eviction are not intentionally running away from their bills
- Donate money, gift cards or household goods for families
- We are always looking for new landlords to add to our program
  - Volunteer your time - families need childcare and transportation to appointments
  - Teach, tutor or mentor - be a life skills presenter or professional mentor
  - Help prepare a home for move-in



**INTERESTED?  
CALL US AT  
610.431.3598**

**Yes, you can help prevent and end family homelessness in our community.**

By contributing online  
or  
enclosing your gift.

See our wish list at  
[www.friendsassoc.org](http://www.friendsassoc.org)



## VOLUNTEER *Impact*

Carole Truskett always searched for ways to contribute to society. Years ago, she was part of Hands on Atlanta, an organization that connects volunteers with nonprofit organizations, where she signed up to lead a toy drive at a hospital every month.

In 2010, Carole was completing a class at Saints Simon and Jude Catholic Church, when one of the sisters at the church, Rose, wanted to get involved. "This was my chance to start something like Hands On," Carole recalls. Through an outreach program at their church called Helping Hands, Carole and Rose arranged a holiday party, in collaboration with Friends Association. Unlike other one-time events, the Holiday Party grew to become an annual event with close to 100 volunteers and 250 guests. The purpose: to create an opportunity for families to experience the joy of the holidays. Carole, Louise M. Welge, and Anne Zamadics form the core organizing team of the Holiday Party. The trio has two important things in common: their church and a passion for giving back.

Planning begins in August for the December event. Step one is to contact the sponsors, most of whom have stuck with the event since the year of its inception. The donors to the party continue to support the event year after year because they believe in the organization's cause – to help children.

When it comes to finding volunteers, Carole says they have had an overwhelming response through an online registration tool. Some volunteers dedicate their time in the kitchen, while others help out at the craft tables. "Each hosted family gathers for a free, professional family photo. The photos that we take of them and their children are often the only ones they have," says Louise.



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