



Protecting the most vulnerable

Scott & Kathleen Hummel's mission of mercy

Back in the early 1990s, Scott and Kathleen Hummel were young social workers with just enough idealism and naiveté to nurture a dream when they began to envision a sanctuary for very young children suffering from abuse, neglect, abandonment or trauma.

Their idea — which became Our Little Haven in 1993 — has since grown into a thriving faith-based organization housed in a four-building complex near St. Louis University. There, over the last 18 years, more than 4,500 children have found help, healing and permanent, loving homes.

by Judy Roberts



Early success

Today, Our Little Haven (OLH) counts among its first “graduates” young people like Ricky Spratley, 18, who will attend the University of Central Missouri in Warrenburg, Mo., this fall on a football scholarship, and Dillon Ohlemiller, 18, a gifted musician who plays alto saxophone and is considering a musical career.

Had Spratley not gone to OLH after being taken from his birth mother, a drug user, he said, “I definitely wouldn’t be where I am now. I think I’d be just kind of lost.”

Ohlemiller’s adoptive mother, Melissa, said she believes her son could have been caught up in the foster-care system had the Hummels not intervened in his life. He weighed two pounds at birth and suffered from respiratory problems as well as prenatal exposure to alcohol. “The outcome could have been very different and tragic,” she said.

Our Little Haven helps children like Ricky and Dillon by getting involved in their lives at an early age — between birth and 10 — and providing them with help, whether it’s nursing care, mental health services or speech, occupational, developmental or physical therapy. The organization operates a residential program and therapeutic preschool in addition to offering parent-child therapy and foster-care case management. They also facilitate adoptions in cooperation with Catholic Charities and Lutheran Family & Children’s Services.

Spratley’s adoptive mother, Janet, fell in love with her then-infant son-to-be while volunteering at OLH through the Junior League of St. Louis. Although she wasn’t planning to adopt a child, Spratley said when she learned that Ricky soon would be eligible for adoption, she thought, “Oh my gosh. I can’t let someone else have him!”

She became certified as a foster parent, took Ricky into her home at 14 months, and adopted him when he was five.

Melissa Ohlemiller met Dillon when he was about eight months old. She and her husband Kevin, who had been looking for a way to expand their family, took him home at 25 months.

Inspired beginnings

Early in their social-work careers, the Hummels, members of Legatus’ St. Louis Chapter, saw the need for a place like OLH that would care for children with special needs during their most formative years. Kathleen was working with sexually abused teens at the Evangelical Children’s Home in St. Louis, and Scott was with the American Red Cross in East St. Louis, managing the Second Chance Shelter for homeless families. Both recalled how they would come home each night, talk about their work and lament that more help wasn’t available at an earlier age for the children they encountered.

As the idea for Our Little Haven evolved over a three-year period, the couple prayed and consulted friends, colleagues and their

supervisors at work — as well as former professors at Rockhurst University in Kansas City, Mo., where they had met and received their undergraduate degrees, and at St. Louis University, where they had gone to graduate school.

By 1993, Kathleen was pregnant with the first of the couple's three children. When her boss asked if she would be returning to work after the baby was born, Kathleen said she knew the time had come to make a decision. "That was a big turning point for me. I had to say I'm not going to return after I have the baby and Our Little Haven was going to happen."

Meanwhile, Scott decided to take the same plunge.

"God gave us our naiveté right when we needed it," he recalled. "Kathleen was pregnant with our first and we just kind of retired from our positions."

On March 1, 1993, five weeks after their daughter Maggie was born, OLH opened its doors.

Starting with one program that served 30 children per year and an all-volunteer staff, the organization has grown to embrace five programs and a professional staff of 72.

Scott is now Our Little Haven's executive director. Kathleen, who designed the organization's programs, worked at OLH full-time until she had the couple's third child. She remains involved and continues to serve on the board.

Community support

Upon arrival at Our Little Haven, each child receives a mental and physical health assessment, a treatment plan and help in locating a permanent home — whether through adoption or aid to family members.

Remarkably, all of OLH's services are provided in a cheerful, home-like and attractive atmosphere. Scott said the couple was determined not to have dark and dingy buildings that reflected what he calls "orphanage syndrome."

About 70% of OLH's funding comes from donations and the rest from public funds through contracts with the state of Missouri for foster-care services. OLH holds three major fundraisers annually — a dinner auction, a golf tournament and a fashion show. In addition, outside groups sponsor several other events on behalf of the organization.

Not surprisingly, the Hummels' work has earned them recognition and awards. Their most recent honor came last October when they were inducted into the Smurfit-Stone Entrepreneurial Alumni Hall of Fame of the John Cook School of Business at St. Louis University.

Jennifer Ehlen, interim director of the university's Center for Entrepreneurship, said the Hummels were an easy choice for induction in the social entrepreneur category. "They're the ultimate example of innovators who are creating something and paying it forward at the same time."

The Hummel children, now in their teens, are becoming part of their parents' legacy. They've grown up with Our Little Haven as part of the family's life. Now that they're older, Kathleen says they're becoming more involved in helping the organization. The family's parish, too, has assisted the effort through special collections and service projects.

"Our Legatus chapter has also been wonderfully supportive in many ways with prayers and contributions," added Scott, who has served as chapter secretary for eight years.

Throughout the last 18 years, the Hummels' Catholic faith clearly has undergirded their work. "We celebrate our faith with everybody," Scott said. "Our rooms and buildings are full of reminders of God's presence with us. In our boardroom, we have a plaque with the phrase, 'Invoked or not invoked, God is present.' We live by that phrase." LM

Judy Roberts is a Legatus Magazine staff writer. Learn more about Our Little Haven at ourlittlehaven.org

