



Lei Barry: A Force for the Homeless

Overcoming her own early struggles, Barry steers a successful mission to provide shelter and comfort.

By Tracey C. Velt November 2008

2008 Good Neighbor Award Winner Lei Barry has helped thousands of homeless people with transitional housing and the skills to make a fresh start.

Determined . . . tenacious . . . a force to be reckoned with. These are the powerful words colleagues and acquaintances use to describe Lei Barry, ABR®, CRS®, a sales associate with Keller Williams Real Estate in Blue Bell, Penn.

And it's these characteristics that helped her single-handedly raise \$1.4 million to found Hope Gardens, a transitional apartment complex for homeless families trying to get on their feet. Her tenacity also expanded the Inter-Faith Housing Alliance from a rental assistance hotline to a full-service nonprofit that has helped more than 2,500 homeless people improve their lives through an array of services, including safe temporary places to stay, permanent housing, and job placement.

After being asked to join the I-FHA board in 1984, Barry says, "I realized very quickly that a hotline wasn't enough." That's when Barry founded the Inter-Faith Hospitality Network and changed the face of I-FHA. "I originally tried to find support to build a homeless shelter, but I ran into roadblocks, so I had to think of an alternative."

Barry, 67, created a network uniting 12 local places of worship. For one month each year, the host congregations house up to three families—no small feat considering it takes about 90 volunteers per congregation. More than just a shelter, Barry's Hospitality Network serves meals, drives people to job interviews, and provides budget counseling, parenting classes, life skills training, and other services geared toward helping them become self-sufficient. The housing is temporary, but if the family still needs assistance after a month, it can move to the next host congregation.

"We try to limit stays to 90 days, but we've had people for nine months," Barry says. "Often, it was a single mother who didn't have the skills to earn enough to support her family. But we're not just giving them a hand-out. They have to have the drive to get their lives back on track."

The urgency to help was personal for Barry. "In the 1960s, I left my first husband and, for a year, was virtually homeless with two children. I [eventually] became successful but it was an enormous struggle," she says.

Years later, during a business trip to New York, an encounter with a homeless person transformed Barry. "I was driving out of the Lincoln Tunnel, stopped at a light, and came face-to-face with an elderly homeless woman. I sped away, and the entire ride home the Lord spoke to me about how I should have helped her."

That's when Barry made it her mission to do something in her own community and why she jumped at the chance to serve on I-FHA's board, where she spent 10 years as chairperson. She also was an unpaid executive director of Hope Gardens for eight years, continues to serve on I-FHA's board, and chairs the fund development committee.

"Inter-Faith wouldn't exist if it wasn't for Lei and her vision," says Barbara Silbert, I-FHA's first paid executive director and now a volunteer for Hope Gardens, which consists of eight transitional, subsidized-rent apartments. "When the times were tough, she carried on. She has a strong faith and if she runs into a roadblock, she just looks for another way to get it done."

No one knows the miracle of I-FHA better than Beth Jenkins, who came to I-FHA eight years ago with her son, then two years old. "I had no family and nowhere to go. I was driving a car that was unlicensed, unregistered, and uninsured—I had nothing," says Jenkins. "There's a perception of a homeless person as the wino on the corner, but I grew up in a regular middle-class home. I had three years of college and a good job history. But I made some bad choices, was extremely depressed, and had a hard time functioning. Inter-Faith showed me that I was loved and valued."

Jenkins now works at Hope Gardens as an administrative assistant and represents the type of success story that inspires Barry to keep working hard to help people get back on their feet. "As I think about the people who have gone through the program, it thrills me to know we gave them a chance," says Barry.

Lei Barry

Keller Williams Real Estate 910 Harvest Drive

Suite 100

Blue Bell, Pennsylvania, 19422

215-654-6001

lei@theleibarryteam.com

www.theleibarryteam.com

Inter-Faith Housing Alliance

31 S. Spring Garden St.

Ambler, Pennsylvania, 19002

215-628-2334

silbert@i-fha.org

www.i-fha.org

COPYRIGHT THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® | HEADQUARTERS: 430 N. MICHIGAN AVE., CHICAGO, IL 60611 |
DC OFFICE: 500 NEW JERSEY AVE. NW, WASHINGTON, DC 20001 | 1 800 874 6500