

## BREAKING FREE FROM THE SHACKLES OF ADDICTION



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Alisha Smith-Page plays on the floor of her Kennewick home Wednesday with her son, Caleb 1. A recovering meth addict, Smith-Page gets help with her rent through a program called Elijah Family Homes.

## HELP TO MOVE ON

Elijah Family Homes helps parents who have kicked their meth habit afford a place to live

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Alisha Smith-Page smiled as her son pulled colorful toys out of a basket under the TV.

He just turned 1 and has blond hair that curls at the nape of his neck. "I love them," Smith-Page said of the curls as she gently smoothed them. Caleb giggled and picked up a stuffed spider.

He's an easy baby, and life with him is good, said the 31-year-old mom from Kennewick.

Life is so different now. Smith-Page is a recovering meth addict and has been clean for 21 months. She has a job and a plan for her life.

She also found a nice place to live with her son, no easy feat because of the felonies on her rap sheet.

A Richland nonprofit called Elijah Family Homes helps her with rent. The group reaches out to people like her who don't qualify for public housing but can't yet make it on their own.

She's not sure what she'd do without them and is glad she doesn't have to find out.

"I don't want to say I wast-

ed half my life, but it's been a rough road," Smith-Page said. "It's made me who I am today."

**First steps**

Elijah Family Homes started about three years ago as a ministry of Christ the King Catholic Church in Richland.

Some parishioners were taking a class there on social justice and wanted to do more than talk about making a difference.

The group became separate from the church last year and has its own nonprofit designation. It has five tenants — all single moms, though single dads and couples are eligible — and provides them money for rent on a sliding scale. It also provides support services and works with other social service agencies.

Group leaders decided to focus on housing because that's where they saw the greatest need, said Barbara Puigh, Elijah Family Homes president.

"The ultimate goal is self-sufficiency for the families. But if you're making

minimum wage, you can't be self-sufficient with five kids," she said. "The first step is getting a roof over their heads."

Elijah Family Homes tenants are low-income but have been turned down for public housing, many because of felony convictions related to drug use.

Tenants with a history of drug abuse must be in or have completed a recovery program and be clean for a year. They agree to undergo random drug tests to confirm they remain clean.

There's a waiting list for the program.

"Our at-risk folks, it's real hard to find housing for them ... There's no place for them. They can't find rental places. They can't find any kind of housing," said Ronda Evans,

“ I was tired of living that way. I just woke up one morning and I was done. ”

— Alisha Smith-Page

executive director of the Kennewick-based 4People, an online social service database.

"Elijah Family Homes is a model that needs to be duplicated by other faith-based organizations."

The program is different from the Elijah House program for men transitioning from jail or prison that recent-

ly was featured in the Herald. But both share a name with the biblical prophet.

When Elijah was in need, a poor widow gave him what she had. Elijah later healed her sick son.

Leaders of the Richland group said seeing tenants gain independence is their reward.

"It's a struggle to go through your past and go beyond that and start a whole new life," said Judy Dirks, a Tri-City social worker and Elijah Family Homes board member. "(The program) is just a beginning. The need is tremendous out there."

**New life**

Smith-Page started using meth when she was 14.

She quit when she got married and had twin daughters, who now are 12, and a son, who's 11. But then she started using again. Her older kids live with their father in Oregon.

Smith-Page has three felony convictions and says she has been in jail "more times than I can count." All her arrests were because of her drug use.

She moved to the Tri-Cities from Oregon in 2001 hoping for change. It didn't immediately come, but during a stint in jail here she met a minister

who started talking to her about forgiveness.

"I was tired of living that way. I just woke up one morning and I was done," she said.

She entered a treatment program and a few weeks later discovered she was pregnant. Caleb was born in December 2006.

Smith-Page became an Elijah Family Homes client in November. The group has helped 13 families since 2005.

Program leaders also point to Pattrisha Mercado as a success story. The 35-year-old lives with her five kids in Kennewick. She used meth for 12 years before getting clean 4 1/2 years ago.

She's the daughter of Minnie Pesina, who was well-known in the Tri-Cities as a Hispanic activist. Pesina died in 2006 after a long battle with liver disease. Before she died, she saw her daughter change her life.

Mercado has a picture of her mom on the fridge.

"Somebody asked me once if I was ready to fill her shoes. I don't think anyone can. She was a very, very accomplished woman," she said.

But she's racking up her own accomplishments. Mercado balances working full time with caring for her boisterous clan. Her kids are ages 2 to 16.

She's also going to school to become a drug counselor.

Mercado attends Elijah Family Homes' monthly tenant meetings and meets regularly with the mentor she was assigned through the program. They talk about everything from family problems to finances.

"They've shown me how to live again," Mercado said.

Smith-Page is grateful too.

"I know God has a plan for me. I'm just kind of excited. It's crazy how many blessings you get when you live your life right," she said. "I look forward to giving back to society what's been given to me."

**Dreams for the future**

Smith-Page lives at the end of a quiet street. There's a plaque by her front door that says, "Live one day at a time."

Underneath it is a cross.

She has a Bible and a copy of *The Purpose Driven Life* on a table in her living room. She reads them every day.

Smith-Page is small and looks much younger than 31. She's friendly and open about her painful past. She likes talking about the future.

There are photos of Caleb all over the house and his toys are lined up against the walls.

She's doing bookkeeping for a trucking company and works part time for a church. She plans to go back to college.

Some of Elijah Family Homes' tenants have relapsed after joining the program. Smith-Page won't say that'll never happen to her, but today she's feeling good.

"It's been almost two years. I rarely even think about it anymore. The further I go the less of a desire I have," she said.

She picked up her boy and started to play.

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