Stability, normalcy and opportunity: the keys to a family emerging from the threat of homelessness.

By Dave Johnson, United Way of the Greater Seacoast

Durham, NH. The winds of fall were playing havoc with the fire-orange leaves on the campus of the University of New Hampshire. Inside Johnson Theater, the UNH orchestra played. In the orchestra, a girl dutifully blew on her horn. And in the audience, three people listened with rapt attention.

One person was the girl's sister. The other was the girl's mother. The third, was Pati Frew-Waters, who tried to fight back tears and failed. Because it was only a few years prior when this little family was homeless.

They had arrived at Seacoast Family Promise that day, desperate and alone. Mom was recently divorced and had next to nothing to her name. As Executive Director of Seacoast Family Promise, Pati has seen her share of these crushing biographies. And in those early moments, when the world is upside down for those that show up at her door, Pati is thinking of one thing: stability.

"The need is great," she says. "Many people don't realize that the lower end of the middle class is under-employed and wages have not kept up with housing."

This is a recipe for volatility as any unforeseen circumstance—an illness, job loss, or divorce—could instantly obliterate any savings or divert funds to needs more pressing than rent. And like that, homelessness becomes a reality.

Last year, Seacoast Family Promise served 20 homeless families, employing the unique service model that has made them a valued partner of United Way.

When families enter the program, they're provided with intensive case management, educational and career supports and financial capability training. At night, home becomes a rotating network of local houses of worship and faith centers. The average stay for a family is about 70 days.

It is a heavy experience, as parents scramble to rebuild their earning potential and children continue to go to school in the face of enormous pressure. For Pati, the best antidote to this intensity is to create a sense of normalcy, especially in the lives of the children.
"When you help stabilize these families, you're doing it with a vision of hope for the children," she says. "Keeping the kids in school and engaged in education and alleviating the social isolation is incredibly important."

Achieving normalcy will become much easier in spring of 2017, when Seacoast Family Promise moves into its new home in Exeter. They will nearly double their square footage and add much-needed efficiencies like a dedicated technology room for job searches and skill development (Pati: "Right now we change our babies right next to the computer and it's not always pretty!"), a larger play area, a garden, dedicated storage units, a "quiet room" and meeting space. Pati estimates that she'll be able to serve an additional five families a year with the move.

"We wanted a building that looked welcoming," she says. "Somewhere where people can feel ownership. Because when you're homeless you lose ownership of everything."

That's what Seacoast Family Promise and United Way see as the key to helping families lift themselves out of these devastating situations: empowering them to regain ownership of their lives.

"Just because you're homeless doesn't mean you can't have the dreams you always dared to dream," Pati says. "Being homeless does not define you. It is a circumstance of the moment."

Normalcy is the seedbed of these dreams and when that returns-when stability is achieved and the worst is behind them-these families often emerge even stronger with a life re-forged.

Like that mother, who's been employed and living in safe, stable housing for years. And like her daughter, the girl who played the horn in the orchestra-a horn that had been donated from someone in the community, a small token of normalcy returned. She's an adult now, long since graduated from UNH and working as a Federal Marshal in Washington D.C.

For Pati, a story like that is music to her ears.