

# Family Promise



Mary and John Bartol, associates from West Bend, Wisconsin, have often written about their parish support of the homeless through “Family Promise.” Four weeks out of each year, their parish provides shelter for homeless families overnight. They have an evening dinner, spend the night, have morning breakfast and are taken to the Family Promise Center, school or their day jobs. At the center, they receive counseling, learn job skills and receive help finding jobs and affordable housing.

The Bartols have been a part of this city/church wide program since its inception. It has been rewarding and challenging. John is no longer able to help with any of the tasks at church. It became a family affair in August

when the most amazing thing happened and it is worthy of sharing. For the past year, Mary has observed the reaction of adults in the program who have recognized John’s diminishing ability and found themselves helping him while they were serving the meals. Older children are very respectful of John.

This particular August, Mary had made up her mind that this would be their last year with the program because of John’s difficulties. A cousin, who usually helps Mary with the meal, had a family commitment so her sister filled in. She would help and Mary’s niece Susan agreed to come from work. Mary made the meal at home, brought it to church with John and somehow it all worked. The plan was to eat together after the meal, Susan would stay with Mary’s sister until the overnight volunteers arrived, and Mary would take John home. She fussed with her popular ribbon pie for this final night.

The mothers were very talkative, especially the mother of four, always apparently watching Mary juggle helping them and seeing to John. This younger mother said to Mary’s sister, “How gently your sister cares for and looks out for her husband.” Later this same mother said much the same thing to Mary as well. In this past year, the families have been more helpful with clean-up and lots of sharing of their troubles. One teenage boy said he was scared to come but felt at home. Mary has been thinking how they are often a family affair on their night, complete with their frailties, humanizing the experience together.