

A conversation with Becky Sims, Executive Director of the Domestic Abuse Family Shelter, Inc. (DAFS)

Tell us about yourself.

I am a graduate of the University of Southern Mississippi and majored in Criminal Justice. I started at DAFS in April of 1988 and became Executive Director in 1994. I have lived in Laurel since 1979 and have one daughter, Priscilla, who is a Laurel police officer. I've been a member of Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in Laurel since 1979.

Tell us about the shelter.

First of all, I have the most wonderful and dedicated staff and board of directors. Our agency serves eleven counties and my job would be an impossible task without them. The Laurel Shelter was opened in 1984 and the Hattiesburg Shelter was opened in 1998. The house was purchased by the Southeast Mississippi Medical Alliance and deeded to DAFS in 1993. We operated it as a transitional house until, with the help of United Way and other funding sources, we were able to provide a full-service shelter in Hattiesburg. The house is over 100 years old and in constant need of repair, as there have been hundreds of women and children living there throughout the years. We are fortunate to be able to provide this service.

Are there any projects in the works for the shelter?

The board has committed to raising money to build a new shelter in the Hattiesburg area in order to be able to more fully serve victims of domestic violence, including older boys and men. Further down the road, we would like to explore the possibility of transitional housing as well.

What do you think are the shelter's biggest successes in the last few years?

Up until last year, we were able to maintain a satisfactory funding level. However, we have sustained large cuts, and are trying to deal with them as best we can. We have made modifications and cuts within the agency, without reducing the quality of services that we offer.

In 2009, our agency successfully completed certification for minimum standards from the Mississippi Coalition Against Domestic Violence. This is a requirement for membership and represents a commitment of our agency to provide the very best services to the people we serve.

What do you see are the biggest challenges and needs the shelter faces?

The Hattiesburg shelter needs more room, more privacy, and more resources for the children. The main challenge at this time is funding.

How do you think those needs and challenges can be met?

By continuing to work closely with other agencies for making repairs at the lowest cost possible and utilizing volunteers for this purpose as well. Constantly researching for grants is also a way to garner more funding.

How can members of the community help?

The community helps through United Way campaigns, through private donations, by their caring about the plight of victims of domestic violence. Another way the community helps is through our law enforcement agencies making their officers available for domestic violence training that our agency provides at no charge. We re very appreciative of this effort as this training translates into increased knowledge of our services and justice for victims.

Is there anything else you'd like our community to know?

It has been an honor and a privilege to not only work for DAFS, but also to know and work with United Way and all its agencies, as well as the Greater Pine Belt Community Foundation and the University of Southern Mississippi.