

With generous support, single mother seeks better life

By Teresa A. Parsons

Against all odds, 24-year-old Pattie Johnston is trying to change her life.

So far, hers has been a life story of abuse and broken promises, living for the moment and running away from difficult situations.

On her own since the age of 16, she's been around the country and in jail, and admits she's used drugs. She left school in the 10th grade, but learned well the single most important lesson of street life: "Don't trust anybody but yourself."

Outwardly she is the same person some Livingston County residents have called "a hopeless case," but Pattie believes that something changed inside her when her daughter Erica was born. Friends urged her to have an abortion when she found she was pregnant, but she didn't believe their assurances that the child was too young to know what was happening.

"Life goes fast living like that," she said of her lifestyle so far. "You get old before your time. I don't think I'd be alive today if it wasn't for her," she added, indicating the blond two-year-old playing quietly beside her. "Everything changed for the good when I had her ... now it's time for both of us to do some growing up, to start putting down some roots."

Listening to her story, it's hard to imagine things getting worse. One of the middle children in a family of eight siblings, she was five when her mother died. Her father decided to put her and her two sisters in foster care, and Pattie was put up for adoption at the age of 12. No one told her why. Her father promised her that the sisters would stay together, but that arrangement proved to be only temporary.

Once she'd been put up for adoption, Pattie said families were constantly testing and evaluating her to see if they wanted her. "I blew three adoptions," she said with bitter pride.

Living in foster homes was no more conducive to developing self-esteem. "If a family wanted a girl and had a boy, they'd just swap you — like a slave or something," she recalled. By age 16, she was on her own.

At times, she's lived in a train car, a camp ground or even the storage locker of an apartment complex where she subsisted on school lunches brought her by friends. She stayed there for two weeks until she was found and kicked out. "It was so nice and quiet," she recalled.

Although she's not mentally retarded, Pattie was at one point placed in a BOCES program for special education students or

"speds." "I was just someone they couldn't handle ... but it was probably the best thing that could have happened to me," she said. The experience has left her with a career goal — to work with handicapped children. "You can see your goals and the progress you're making. They're as innocent and loving as you can get."

The whole story fades into the unreal past when one watches Pattie with Erica and wonders where the two of them learned about gentleness and love. For her part, Erica is remarkably content as long as her mother is nearby.

"There's always a hole in the wall for a person alone," Pattie said. "But you can't take a baby there ... and I've got to think of her. Everything is for her. God it's hard being a mom sometimes. I look back and wish I'd realized ..." she added, her voice trailing away.

Her quiet change in attitude has been awhile in surfacing, if for no other reason than because Pattie had no idea how to change. Living with friends in whatever trailer or apartment had room for her, Pattie found herself repeating the same patterns of behavior, despite her best resolves. Gradually, she began to envision a place of her own as the means by which she could escape the downward spiral she was riding. At last she had a goal, but no inkling of how to get there.

Early in September, Pattie and Erica found themselves homeless once again. They had been living in a trailer with another family — against the rules of the trailer park. Calling all the Avon motels in the phone book, Pattie found the cheapest and registered there with what was left of her welfare check. The Department of Social Services, she said, told her to stay there until her money ran out, and to look at the apartments they would recommend. They didn't, however, tell her how she was supposed to travel to those apartments.

As her money dwindled, she made the rounds of churches, asking for help. "Most of them gave us 'hurry along,'" she said, but at St. Mary's in Geneseo, the woman at the rectory knew her and made a call to Pam Masterson at the Livingston County Office of Social Ministry.

Pattie said she was close to complete despair at that point. "When she (Masterson) walked in, there was a glow around her like the sun," Pattie recalled.

Masterson convinced Avon Interfaith — an ecumenical council of churches, which includes St. Agnes Church and parishes in Geneseo, Livonia and Caledonia — to sponsor the Johnstons for another week at the motel.

Then, with the help of Marge and Jim Beman of Lay Advocates — church-sponsored volunteers with legal training — Pattie received an emergency housing assistance grant from the Department of Social Services. The money enabled her to keep her motel room while she continued to search for an apartment.

Meanwhile, parishioners from St. Agnes Church in Avon have befriended Pattie and Erica, and have provided what most agencies cannot — support for her quest for stability. Their simple human concern for Pattie and her child has made her dreams seem possible. "I'm doing what's right. I know I am because there are people behind me," she said, adding in near wonder "I really think it's going to happen this time."

Even with support, Pattie is living under intense pressure. On a recent Thursday morning, sitting in her room with Erica at 10:30, Pattie faced the possibility of having to pack and leave within an hour and a half. She was waiting for the Department of Social Services to notify her landlord whether they would extend her grant for three more days. If not, she was required to move out by noon. At 11:30, she received a call that she



Pattie Johnston and her two-year-old daughter, Erica, have lived in a lot of houses, but never a home.

had the extension, and she visibly relaxed.

An hour later she went to eat lunch at a diner, where she was told that her food voucher had been cut off. Several calls later, it was restored, only to be cut off permanently a week later. Fortunately, she's since negotiated with the department for an efficiency apartment where she can prepare meals herself.

The social services department has recommended apartments and jobs that Pattie must seriously consider if her funding is to continue. But most have been outside Avon, in Nunda or Mount Morris or even more rural areas. Those locations don't take into account the network of support she has found in Avon, and desperately needs bolster her morale. No one expects that network to hold up 25 miles away.

Pattie is also afraid that the money she's received from Social Services' emergency housing assistance will at some point be taken out of her monthly check. At \$349, she estimates that her check could cover rent up to \$295, not including utilities, or \$325 inclusive. That leaves \$25 a month and food stamps for the two of them. Apartments are rare in Avon to begin with, and their scarcity pushes rents upward. And given a choice, most landlords avoid renting to someone on welfare.

Meanwhile, Pattie said Child Protective Services has threatened to take her daughter away if she isn't able to find a stable home. Her reaction to that revealed her potential anger. "I would never leave her to be a government experiment — that's all foster kids are," she said with icy conviction. "The only things she's got are her toys and me."

"That's where the system fails," explained Georgiana Delles, one of the parishioners from St. Agnes who has worked with Pattie. "I'm frustrated, not with the people at social services, but with the structure ... It's so dehumanizing. I don't know any answers really, but I do know that money doesn't

solve the problems. Human support is what's vital to give."

In fact, Delles has seen Pattie virtually every day, inviting her home to dinner, helping her with laundry, driving her to the store or to Mt. Morris for an appointment.

Delles and Masterson realize that just finding Pattie Johnston an apartment won't solve her problems. They also admit that they are not equipped to deal with all of Pattie's long-term problems. "We are set up to deal with emergency situations ... to get her shelter and then follow up with counseling," Masterson said. She added that she has been criticized for wasting time and church money on "a Johnston."

Besides fighting the odds of public opinion, Pattie's biggest potential enemy in her struggle is herself and her own inclinations — to run when the pressure gets too heavy or to despair of leaving her past behind.

"There's so much that's gone on ... I mean the kind of life I've lived ... well you name it, I've seen it. Sometimes it seems like there's no use trying to get free of all that," she said.

But Delles pointed out that while Pattie has accumulated a history of confrontations where she acted in anger, there is no record of what kind of provocation, frustration and abuse prompted her actions. "That kind of despair is not something you can easily put into a form that other people can understand," she said.

Regardless of the risks, Delles added, "I have time to be a friend. If I ever don't have time for that, put me in a box."

Lay advocate Jim Beman described in a different way his willingness to take a chance on Pattie. Christians should never "write anyone off," he said. "If church people say they can't make the difference in a situation, then those people ought to go back to their Bibles and study. I say when everybody else gives up on somebody, give 'em to me."

THOUGHTS TO CONSIDER



EDWIN SULEWSKI
FUNERAL DIRECTOR

WHAT IS GRIEF LIKE?

Grief is like a series of waves that come and go. Feelings vary in intensity over a long period of time as we are constantly reminded of changes in our lives that result from the death of our loved one. Perhaps we are reminded of our loved one when we return to our empty house or when we set the table and realize the person is no longer present, or we realize a holiday is different this year or we encounter some frustration that our loved one would have taken care of. Our feelings may seem unpredictable but that is normal. They come unexpectedly and they may be jumbled or mixed. It is not unusual for feelings to be very intense for six months, to continue in intensity for the duration of a year and then lessen, but not completely disappear as time goes on.

We purchase all forms of insurance to protect our family & assets, not because we expect the worst to happen, but to be prepared. Doesn't it make sense then to prepare for what will happen. Let our trained counselors assist you with the many options available in planning for a worry-free future.

Burial Cremation Entombment

SCHAUMAN FUNERAL HOME
2100 St. Paul St. 342-3400

FOR YOUR PRO-LIFE NEEDS

write
"The Precious Feet People"
Box 730 • Taylor, AZ. 85830

A complete line of Pro-Life, Pro-Family items at **ROCK BOTTOM** prices.

- "Precious Feet": (identical in shape and size to the tiny feet of a 10 week old unborn baby.)
- Bumper Stickers
- Decals
- Balloons
- Posters
- Post Cards
- Pamphlets
- Mother's Pendants
- your logo lapel pin
- and much more!

* Send \$2.00 for your pair of "Precious Feet" and generous sampling of Pro-Life literature. Includes catalog & bulk prices.

OR
* Send for FREE catalogue

Next-To-New-Sale

Blessed Sacrament School Hall

546 Oxford St. at Monroe Ave.

Thursday, Oct. 10 10:00-8:00
Friday, Oct. 11 10:00-8:00
Saturday, Oct. 12 9:00-2:00 (½ price)

Come for lunch or supper.

Padre Pio Presentation

By Mr. Joseph Peterson

Friday, October 11, 1985
7:30 p.m.

St. Augustine School Hall
410 Chili Avenue

Free Admission