

By Mariah Wenzel
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LOVELAND — Tina Smith lives with her mother in a modest Loveland home. She has a son, a daughter and a foster-dog named Huli. Smith's young daughter, Rose, has a bag of stuffed animals that she carries around the house; most of them were given to her. She likes to take the colored jewels off her small chandelier. "I always put them back when I'm done," she said. Rose's older brother, Jake, likes to set booby traps around the house to protect his family from intruders — especially his father. Two years ago, Smith knew she had to get away from her small hometown in another state. Her daughter was only 18 months old; her son was 4. Her husband worked as a guard in the nearby prison. In this town, those in law enforcement were a tight group of friends and they refused to believe that their friend was abusing his wife, his children and his dogs, Smith said.

After enduring abuse, Smith fled to a family services agency in a decisive action, where she, Jake and Rose hid. "I was afraid he would kill (our children)," she said. Currently, Smith does not work outside the home. Instead, she stays at home with Rose, who is too young to go to school. Jake goes to elementary school, and Smith is divorced. She goes to the House of Neighborly Service, a local resource center in Larimer County, about once a month. The House of Neighborly Service is one of the agency recipients of the Northern Colorado Empty Stocking Fund. The House has "everything under one roof," said Glorie Magrum, executive director of the House. It has housing, classes, a cost-sharing prescription and utility program, a food bank, clothing distribution and other services. "I had a few bags of (my children's) clothes and a few of their toys. ... We have so much now that we give things away once in a while," Smith said. Smith took advantage of the free classes on finance at the House. "They give you a good place to be," Smith said. Two years ago, while living in the shelter, Smith said she knew that she had to flee, but first she had to gain full custody of her children. "Survival mode is a selfish place to be," she said. Smith was adamant her children were coming with her and getting away from their father.

None of her reports of abuse had been accepted. No legal record backed her up. When she tried to get a lawyer, she said, "No one would represent me." By law, her husband had every right to his children. Her 30-day temporary custody was running out when a legal advocate finally took on Smith's case. Upon gaining custody of her children, she had 24 hours to leave the state. Her sister paid for part of the flight to Colorado, where Smith's parents live. Smith tried to work when she first arrived, but she and her children were diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. "The kids used to cover their faces with blankets. Jake would wear scary masks. I think it was because my husband threatened to kill them or me if we ever left him." Smith whispers so her daughter will not hear. They would cry when their mother did yard work. "They didn't want me to be outside," she said. Jake would even create booby traps around the yard, in case his dad came back. Adding to their grief was the loss of Smith's father. "He was diagnosed in early December (with lung cancer) and died after Christmas three or four weeks later," she said. However, for Christmas the year her father was diagnosed, the family received a donated Christmas tree from an affiliate of the House of Neighborly Services. Tina Smith said her mother and father were able to watch their grandchildren decorate the tree.

As her father's illness progressed, the House gave Smith gas money to drive to the hospital. In addition, the owners of Bob's Barbecue, working with the House, provided a Christmas dinner. It was so much food that it lasted several extra days. "It's the little things ... I have gotten so many nice things. It's amazing when you're the recipient (of what people give)," Tina Smith said. The House survives on donations and volunteer efforts. Workers there encouraged the Smiths to get involved with the community and give back what they could. Smith got involved with the local animal shelter and began fostering animals. The children witnessed animal abuse when living in another state. "They were very bothered by it," Smith said. Jake remembers his father and his actions more clearly than his little sister. Smith believed that working with animals would benefit him.

Jake began to work with the Animal Shelter of the Rockies and even helped collect donations with his counterpart Laverne, one of the family's foster dogs. Laverne has since been adopted by a permanent family. Smith recalls a volunteer at the women's shelter who worked for Mary Kay, a makeup and beauty company. "This woman would come and give us makeovers. ... Maybe give someone a lip gloss. ... I remember sitting outside and just bawling. ... The little things are huge."

Smith only goes to the House when she truly needs help. "She just really works hard and tries to make it on her own," Magrum said. "She's doing all the things that she needs to do to make it for her and her kids." The House also features the Adopt-a-Family program for the Christmas season. Volunteers give a holiday basket to their family. In Smith's case, her volunteer, known only as Betty, adopted the family. Betty went beyond what was expected. She gives the children small holiday gifts every year and has given Smith money for groceries. "Women who don't have a safe place to go or people to help ... I just don't know how they do it," Smith said. "I don't think people realize the impact they have."

Mariah Wenzel is a Colorado State University student who wrote this story on behalf of the Northern Colorado Empty Stocking Fund. The names of those receiving services were changed to protect their identity.