

# GJ Housing Authority expands resources to support families

[By Rachel Sauer](#)

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It's more than just a roof overhead. If it was merely the existence of a roof, the effect would be hardly better than a jacket hastily draped over hunched shoulders and bowed head during a downpour.

It's a roof and the walls that support it. It's a roof and walls and a door that locks, and the golden glow of lights that turn up when the sun turns down. It's a place for the blankets and a place for the skillet and a place for two tired feet, kicked up and crossed at the ankle at the end of a long day.

It's familiar books on the shelf and a pillow that perfectly accommodates a particular, sleepy head. It's a framed picture of grandma on the end table and a snack of Hot Pockets heating in the microwave. It's a sofa cushion the dog nibbled and just one more episode of Netflix binge watching.

It's familiar and sometimes messy, more than just shelter, a fortress, a haven, a port in the storm.

Home. It's home.

Too frequently taken for granted, and one of the greatest gifts of life in the rough-and-tumble right now.

And sometimes, amid the unpredictable confluence of situation and circumstance, it seems just beyond reach.

But need it be? Sometimes all it takes is a hand extended, which the Grand Junction Housing Authority offers in the form of not just housing and housing vouchers, but rental assistance, foreclosure counseling, family support, tutoring and many other avenues of family and individual support and community building.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Housing Authority's founding, and each year since 1974 it has increased the number of community members it assists, expanded the services it offers and grown its community partnerships.

"I think the world of housing is kind of evolving over the years," said Lori Rosendahl, Housing Authority executive director. "We went from really just helping the elderly and disabled — that's how we got started — and then moving into helping families and really beginning to focus on the whole family and focus on services. And we're seeing a change in the way we do housing now and it's really about creating healthy families and helping people get up and on their feet.

"I think there's the perception that once people get housing they really stay on housing, but we work really hard to help people become self-sufficient, people who are elderly or disabled need us for the long haul, but for a lot of working families, we're a stop-gap."

She emphasized that those who are not elderly or disabled must be working in order to access Housing Authority services. The problem, people often find, is that this can be an expensive area. Someone working full-time at \$8 an hour and paying 30 percent of their income toward rent still will be unable to meet the \$630 average for rent of a one-bedroom apartment. Applying for rental assistance, however, doesn't mean they're not self-sufficient, Rosendahl said, and not contributing to the greater economy of this area.

"Self-sufficiency, in my opinion, is really in the eye of the beholder," she said. "In our community, if you want to afford a modest two-bedroom, you need to make \$15 an hour. So, if they work full time at \$8 an hour, they

are going to need us, but they're self-sufficient. They really are. To me, self-sufficiency is we have a healthy family that is working at their maximum capacity."

The Housing Authority is moving in a direction of working with children, Rosendahl said, "because we really know that children who are proficient in third grade will be much more likely to go on and graduate and not need us in the future. So, we've been doing a lot of book campaigns, we have a tutor that works with families that were homeless when they came to us, to get the kids back to grade level.

"I think we've grown from Ratekin (Tower) and Walnut Park into this organization that really looks at supporting the entire family and really moving people toward self-sufficiency."

And this has happened amid fluctuating budgets, the ever-present need for funds and the growing demand for services. But if there's any evidence of four decades of success, Rosendahl said, it's in the families and individuals who are cozy at home this holiday season, self-sufficient and working and striving toward a happy life.

For information about the Grand Junction Housing Authority, call 245-0388 or go to [gjha.org](http://gjha.org).

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## 'To have roots, to have a home'



Crystal Woolen and her son, Angel Martinez, 10, moved into their Palisade home in July 2012. It's a home earned with hard work and with assistance through Housing Resources of Western Colorado, which partners with the Grand Junction Housing Authority.

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There are no perimeter checks anymore, no middle-of-the-night patrols of the door locks and window latches and sometimes the whole block.

The vigilance is always there, though, the awareness. She still doesn't like sitting with her back to a walkway or not having a clear view of her surroundings.

But inside the walls of her Palisade home, walls on which she hung the sheetrock, walls she painted, Crystal Woolen, 33, can exhale any tightness in her chest, a purging sigh because she is home and home is safe.

Her son, Angel, a fourth-grader at Taylor Elementary School, putters around, doing his thing when they arrive home together each evening. And they do their thing together, maybe watching "Honey, I Shrunk the Kids," maybe fixing some chicken and vegetables for dinner, maybe putting up the Christmas decorations or playing with the dog.

"The only place I've lived longer than two or three years is here," Crystal explained. "I wanted my son to be able to have roots, to have a home."

She knows something of rootlessness: As the daughter of a soldier, who was the son of a soldier, she was born at an Army base in Germany and spent her childhood moving between various postings.

When she enlisted in the U.S. Army Reserves, she became the fourth generation of soldier in her family.

After Sept. 11, her unit was called up and deployed to Iraq for a year. Just a few days before she left, she and her then-fiancé went to the courthouse — she in combat boots and BDUs — and got married.

But war was hard on her, it changed her, and though she got pregnant almost as soon as she got home, the marriage dissolved soon after Angel was born. So, she had a baby and she had these knife-edged memories, these knots that wouldn't untangle, and she had, though she wouldn't admit it for a long, long time and waited even longer before seeking help, PTSD.

“You live your life every day knowing someone's trying to kill you, then you come home and how do you let go of it?” she asked.

She struggled. Even with at least one job, often two or three, she couldn't make ends meet. Child care was crippling her financially, and then she lost her and Angel's apartment when it was sold and the rent doubled. They became long-term couch surfers.

The excruciating solution, at least in the short-term, was to send Angel to live with his father in Utah for two years, “the hardest thing I've ever done,” she said.

A job in the oil field — she worked heavy equipment as an Army engineer — brought the hope of stability, until the industry cratered and she was homeless once again.

She was determined, though, to bounce rather than break. She went to the Grand Junction Housing Authority, where she'd worked before, but there were no open positions. Instead, she received a Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing (VASH) voucher and got an apartment at Linden Pointe.

After getting a job at Startek, she went back to school, earning her degree in health care administration last year from the University of Phoenix and between work and school, raising her son and becoming financially independent, she secured a home through Housing Resources of Western Colorado.

For months she put in more than 15 hours per week of sweat equity on her home and the other homes in her neighborhood, and in July 2012 she and Angel moved into their three-bedroom, two-bathroom home on a quarter-acre of land with a view of Grand Mesa and Mount Garfield.

Now, transitioning into a new position in Peer Support at the Grand Junction Veterans Affairs Medical Center, she goes home at the end of the day to a spot that's hers.

A saber that reads “Pirate's Quarters” hangs over the doorway to Angel's spacious bedroom and on the wall of her own bedroom, in seascape shades of blue and green, are three words: “Breathe,” “Relax,” “Dream.”

Dream especially — for dreams of home made real.

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## It's a haven, it's rest between adventures



For Seth Richie, home is a Linden Pointe apartment he moved into in 2004 with assistance through the Grand Junction Housing Authority's Housing Choice Voucher program.

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The evidence that Seth Richie is hardly ever home hangs, ironically enough, on the walls of his Grand Junction home.

The mounted heads and horns of animals he's bagged — sometimes hunting solo, sometimes with his 8-year-old son, River — hang as a testament to a life lived outward.

"I love being outside," he said. "I'm always going to be wanting to do something outdoors."

And it's not just the game trophies, though the enormous, six-point bull hanging in his bedroom seems proof enough of his passion. There are the two gray, 14-foot river rafts, tidily folded and stacked on a green trailer pushed against a wall of his living room. There's a fishing rod laid across the six-point bull's antlers and a huge coat closet filled with tennis rackets and basketballs and everything else that draws him outside.

The fact that 20 years ago, at age 17, he was in a car accident that paralyzed his legs and killed the friend who was with him, the fact that he was so young, and it was so unfair, has rarely been a reason to even pause. Home, then, has become the safe place to land and rest and recuperate before springing back out again.

For Seth, home is an apartment in Linden Pointe that he moved into in November 2004, with assistance through the Housing Choice Voucher program. The doorways and hallways are wide, the kitchen counters and stove accommodating a wheelchair, the showers big enough to wheel into.

So, when he gets home from work at Ariel, a job he recently started after working more than eight years in the transition and community skills programs at Strive, he and River have some dinner, River does his homework and they just hang out and consider their next adventures.

It might be tennis — Seth is a nationally ranked player and attended Colorado Mesa University on a tennis scholarship — or it might be rafting with grandpa or hunting during season.

When River is with his mother, Seth heads out solo. Last summer, he did several rafting trips by himself and has been known to spend 10 days alone in the wilderness when he's hunting. Just ask him about the time he had to dig 60 feet of rutted dirt road just to get his Jeep unstuck.

And because he does these things, because he's always managed to swing back up after a bout of the downs, he works with others who are recently disabled, visiting them in the hospital and in rehab, befriending them, letting them know that the end of one thing can be the beginning of another.

And then he goes home, his safety net and springboard, the place where he has no trouble envisioning what might be next.

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## ‘You feel safe, you feel free’



This family received help from Grand Junction Housing Authority’s Family Stability Program in finding their home. Pictured from left are Elisa Murillo, Dulce Murillo, Elise Uribe, Cassandra Murillo and Maria deJesus Ruiz.

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Elisa Murillo’s winning design hangs framed on a living room wall in her family’s Orchard Mesa home. In it, the white, feathered wings of a guardian angel — she thinks of it as her grandfather — are spread wide over the family hugged beneath, over the home in which they’re safe.

She entered her drawing and an accompanying essay about “What home means to me” in a 2011 National Association of Housing and Redevelopment contest, winning not just the state but the national contest, which included a \$500 savings bond and a trip to Washington, D.C.

And what does home mean to her?

“A home is protection and love,” she said. “You feel safe, you feel free.”

It wasn’t always this way. She was born in California and moved to Grand Junction with her parents and two younger sisters when she was 7. Their path was rocky because the rent was infrequently paid or wasn’t paid at all, and the family was forced to move often.

“My dad suffered from depression,” she said, “it was hard for him to let go of the past. He was really hard on my mom and me, so finally my mom said enough.”

Her mom, Elise Uribe, admitted it was an excruciating decision after trying and trying to make the marriage work, “but I had to set the example for my daughters, I had to teach them to be strong and respect themselves,” she said. “So, we became homeless.”

For months, mom and her three girls — Elisa, Cassandra and Dulce — couch surfed, mom suffering from a hip that desperately needed surgery, none having a clear view of a future that included security.

Elisa, now 21, was just 15 at the time, trying to maintain her grades at Holy Family Catholic School, trying to be solid and steady for her younger sisters.

With patience and persistence, the family got help through the Family Stability Program and found a home on Orchard Mesa.

As part of the program’s family goal-setting, Elisa set a goal of graduating high school with a 4.0, which she did, and attending college. She’s in her third year at Colorado Mesa University, studying exercise science, serving on the Cultural Diversity Board and dancing with Arte en Movimiento Ballet Folklorico.

She was not alone in her goal-setting. Her mom is working toward a bachelor's degree in fine art at CMU and Cassandra will start at CMU next year.

“My mom rescued us from a bad environment so that we could have a good life,” Elisa said. “She was so brave.”

Because of that, this family of women — Elisa Uribe's mom, Maria, recently moved to Grand Junction from Mexico to help her daughter and granddaughters — have created a home of hard work and family support and love.