



Murfreesboro Housing Authority Offers Shelter for Katrina-affected Family

Phyllis Pugh is the oldest of six children, born and raised in Mississippi. Because her father was not in the picture, she was raised by a single mother, and the family of seven lived back and forth between their own home in Montrose, MS, and their grandmother's home in Louin, MS, just a few miles up the road.

"We came up poor," Pugh says. She was married, for the first time, at 18, and had two daughters, Erica and Elaina. "Those girls were my light, because the marriage was terrible."

Pugh's husband left the family when the girls were ages 2 and 3. "My mother taught us all how to love, and how to work hard," Pugh says.

It's clear when you meet Phyllis that she has a huge heart. When you hear her story, you learn she's not afraid of hard work. After graduating from Bay Spring High School in 1987, Pugh spent the next several decades working---at a grocery store, in home health, at a chicken factory and as a housecleaner.

During that time, she met her son Edwin's father, and the couple was together for four years. Later, she had a fourth child, son Ethan.

One of the most important parts of Pugh's life is her deep faith in God. "I was saved when I was 16," she says. In addition to raising her family and working, Pugh began speaking at area churches and community groups about her faith.

A speaking engagement brought her to Murfreesboro. "I'd never been out of Mississippi before that trip," she remembers.

Later, that single trip to Murfreesboro would prove fateful. After Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast in 2005, including Pugh's town of Bay Spring, she lost her home. "We literally had nowhere to go, and here I was with four children," she said.

An acquaintance offered Phyllis and her family a trailer, but soon after moving in, the state of Louisiana declared the trailer condemned. "I begged them to please let me make it work," she said.

Once again with nowhere to live, a cousin, who lived in Detroit, MI, encouraged Pugh to bring her family there. At the same time, the friend who had brought her to Murfreesboro to speak invited her to come to Tennessee.

"I prayed about it, and we came to Tennessee."

About the same time, Pugh developed heart disease and became unable to work for a period of time. "We ended up applying for housing with the Murfreesboro Housing Authority, and Kris Lord called soon after that with a house for us," she said. "I'll never forget that day, knowing I would have a place for my children to grow up."

Pugh, determined to have the nicest and cleanest house on the block, spent time working in the yard and cleaning the house. "We had beautiful flowers, and everybody commented on them," she said. She now lives in the newly developed Oaklands neighborhood in Murfreesboro.

At one point, Pugh worked three jobs at once, at Tyson Foods, in home health and private sitting with patients. Earlier, she went to cosmetology school and truly loved fixing hair.

Then Pugh got sick. "My heart disease came back and I developed fibromyalgia," she said. "It was really tough."

Today, Pugh has "good days and bad days, but God is a healer," she says. "I told myself, 'just hold on. God is going to bless us.'" And, today Pugh has five grandchildren who she says are the "brightest blessings" of her life.

Pugh says all of her challenges have been worked out, sooner or later, one by one. "I've worked since I was six years old, and I started cooking then. I can truly cook anything," she said.

She credits God with her life. "God has given me so many gifts, including the spirit of excellence."

And Pugh has passed that spirit on to her children. This year, her youngest son graduated from college with a degree in criminology.

"Don't ever give up," she advises.

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