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WHEN THE NEEDS ARE DEEP, THE  
VISION GETS DEEPER

# How Kingdom Life Ministries went from giving away backpacks to providing housing

By **Natalie Hart**

It started with a simple idea: let's give away backpacks with school supplies to kids in Grand Rapids. Pastor Daniel Parker got his church, Kingdom Life Ministries (<http://www.klmchurch.com/>) (KLM), and their community development arm to catch the vision, and they partnered with local organizations and other churches (and the pastors reached into their own pockets) to make it happen.



*Backpacks loaded up and ready to be given away.*

Several years later, that simple giveaway is now the annual Back to School Carnival that serves 6,000 people with food, games, entertainment, haircuts, school supplies, and representatives from community organizations ready to help.



It's also the engine that fuels their Family Leadership Initiative (/Family-Leadership) (FLI) program, as well as T (<https://www.facebook.com/The-Deborah-Project-and-The-Deborah-House-616789458335869/>)he Deborah Project and The Deborah House (<https://www.facebook.com/The-Deborah-Project-and-The-Deborah-House-616789458335869/>).

But we're getting ahead of ourselves.



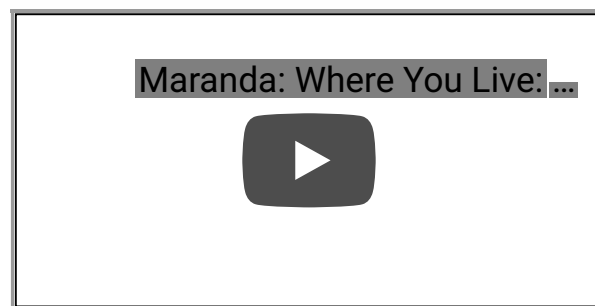
Pastor Doriane Parker-Sims (sister of Pastor Daniel) had always wanted to use her ministry to help single parents. Since she had been one herself for a time, she knew the financial, emotional, and spiritual strain those families are under. Providing supplies for the new school year – every school year – allowed her to address one common financial pressure-point.

Then, when they were exploring year-round programs to offer, Gatherings of Hope started FLI, and it made sense to work together. With its mix of math tutoring, parent education, and a communal meal with topics to get parents and kids talking, FLI is designed to help families with school-aged kids, and that's who came to the Carnival. And, as Parker-Sims said, "It's a wonderful tool to teach people about the love of Christ." So KLM began to draw families from the community into the program.

Many of those families were headed by single mothers, and as they got to know these women, Parker-Sims felt called to address other needs they had. And so, in

2011, the Deborah Project was born.

The Deborah Project is a once-a-month Saturday gathering for single mothers. KLM provides childcare in the church nursery and classes for school-aged kids so the women can have a (rare) break and participate without worry. They spend time in God's Word and talk about issues of self-image and budgeting. The women receive household items, personal care items, diapers. They get to sit down to a catered lunch. Parker-Sims smiles as she lists the fun they have: Christmas parties, tea parties, pampering parties, workout parties. It truly is a pleasure for her to treat these women.



Maranda: Where You Live segment on The Deborah Project

Soon, that wasn't enough.

Parker-Sims said,

**“I began to observe a desperate need: we were giving them all these wonderful products to help their families and they had no place to call home.”**

She cited the statistics for Grand Rapids: “In 2015, we had 900 homeless people, 600 of those were in families, 312 of them were children. There are 146 people on the waiting list to get housing, and the shelters are full.” Through the Deborah Project, she was meeting young mothers who had to choose whether to live in an insect-infested house or in their car, who had to stay with friends and move frequently from couch to couch, who were living in shelters, who didn't have

extended families to be their safety net.

Since housing was the need, they started fundraising, and in October 2015, they opened the first Deborah House. In June of this year, they opened the second. Next summer, they will open the third.

Each Deborah House is a unit in a duplex with room for two families and a mentor. The mentor is a woman who lives in the duplex, cooks meals for and with them, and leads weekly worship and devotionals--she makes the house a home where the young mothers can feel secure, where they can learn about financial management, where they can experience the love of God. Parker-Sims and the interior designer on her team decorate each new resident's room, with new bedding and accessories.



Families can live in the Deborah House for up to two years, but many women don't take that long to get back on their feet. In just over one year of operation, Parker-Sims says, "We are seeing women raise their credit scores, get good jobs and reliable transportation, we are seeing spiritual lives turning around." One resident improved her credit score from 400 to 700 in six months, and now she owns her own apartment and her own car. The women are graduating from the Deborah House to their own places, and are becoming leaders in the ministries they once received. So far, 15 moms and kids have gone through the program. Parker-Sims sums it up:

**"They are coming out of desolation and leaving full of hope. I'm seeing change and transformation in ways I've never dreamed of."**

This narrative makes it sound like a simple and inevitable progression from backpack giveaway to two houses for single mothers, but it took a committed group of volunteers and of volunteer organizers, it took the church to catch Parker-Sims' vision, it took the foresight to start a separate 501c3 organization to



run the work the church wanted to do in the community, and it took the courage to ask and to keep asking community organizations and local businesses to partner with them. Parker-Sims says, “We are Grateful with a capital-G to Gatherings of Hope for their generosity to help us reach those in need in our community.”

Other organizations that have been instrumental include Mercy Health Saint Mary’s, Spectrum Health, Chemical Bank, Strong Beginnings, Dare to Dream, Celebration Cinema, and Home Depot, not to mention the hundreds of individual donors, or the chef who not only donates her time, but also the food for the Princess Gala that serves as the major fundraising event for the Deborah House.



*The room at Frederik Meijer Gardens and Sculpture Park, ready for the 2016 Princess Gala.*

When I asked her how many houses she’d like to have, Parker-Sims ducked her head and admitted, “I want to have eight. Dreamers are crazy.”

Given how deep the needs are in Grand Rapids, and how the Lord “is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,” and how Pastor

Daniel Parker, Pastor Doriane Parker-Sims, and the Kingdom Life Ministries Community Development Corporation have continued to deepen the reach of their ministries, we can't wait to see where their dreams and the Lord take them.

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