

# **Inside the Hidden House of Healing: Intentionality and Liminality at a Domestic Violence Shelter**

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## **Introduction**

Imagine walking through prison gates into a spacious yet cozy kitchen attached to the dining area and a well-worn family room that has offices filled with constant motion in the back of it, built on top of a dormitory and counseling center filled with bruised and hidden women with children frolicking on the playground in the backyard. That is Helpmate, a domestic violence (DV) shelter for women. Helpmate is a home, built through intentionality to create a loving space to promote healing and agency.

Helpmate attends to the needs of women and children across a gamut of issues including elder abuse, child abuse, sexual violence, and physical violence. During the fiscal year of 2010-2011, Buncombe County (Asheville is the county seat) ranked 7th out of 100 counties in DV cases (1,670) and 13th in sexual assault cases (345).<sup>1</sup> Helpmate serves as “Buncombe County’s primary provider of crisis-level services for victims of domestic violence and their children.”<sup>2</sup> The agency defines itself through its mission statement as “a domestic violence agency that works with our community to eliminate abuse and fear.”<sup>3</sup> Helpmate’s advocates embrace the mission statement and promote its goals using the feminist empowerment model.<sup>4,5</sup> This model entails taking women out of the role of the “victim,” and helping them help themselves (men receive assistance as well, but do not stay at the shelter). Under this model, Helpmate’s clients receive recommendations and encouragement to make decisions for themselves, instead of proscriptions and ultimatums.

The use of affirmative language as a healing modality is important at Helpmate and in the DV movement to give women back the power they lost.<sup>6</sup> The power dynamics involved with DV make the abused feel helpless and instill a perception of worthlessness. Women at the shelter are called “clients” or “residents” and referred to as “survivors,” not as “victims” by the staff who are referred to as “advocates.”

Helpmate attends to the whole person by facilitating long-term permanent solutions to DV, not just addressing an emergency situation. Clients who come to Helpmate for shelter and support find a loving home constructed to encourage healing and the promotion of moving past the role of victim into the role of survivor. Every aspect of Helpmate is created with intentionality in mind to help clients to regain their agency. Under the shelter’s healing modality for feminist empowerment to take hold, the clients must have a safe and loving environment that functions like a home.

## **Welcome Home: Inside The House Of Healing**

Helpmate is an integral part of Asheville with over 30 years serving the community through outreach and providing an emergency 24-Hour hotline. The shelter overlooks the city from a secluded hill, housed in a nondescript building; there is no signage, no indication of what is

inside. Security is paramount at Helpmate and inextricably necessary for the physical and mental wellbeing of the clients. Jodi Wygmans, a Case Manager at Helpmate, explains that many survivors describe the shelter as “‘landing in heaven’ or ‘becoming a new person.’” She continues, “some clients coming in have not slept well in a very long time, have not been allowed to care for themselves the way they’d like out of fear that they’d be accused of cheating, have had to wade through mindgames just to survive a day, many have extensive PTSD symptoms and more... [when] given...days of rest and freedom, a person is able to think more clearly and sometimes able to start weeding out the negative, degrading words they’ve been hearing. Helpmate is the home that many survivors of DV never had, a safe place that is free from the burdens of the outside world, a refuge from the storm. Keeping the shelter hidden allows clients to focus on healing and not the stresses and conditions that brought them to the shelter.”

Lily reiterates Jodi’s sentiment: “I had a client who was repeatedly sexually assaulted by her husband. When she moved into the shelter...she told me was how wonderful it was...to take a shower and know that no one would walk in...and attack her.” The safety offered by Helpmate cannot be overstated and the shelter practices security by obscurity. If you live in Asheville, chances are high that you have passed Helpmate several times, but never knew it was there. Helpmate itself occupies a liminal state; it must be part of the community to serve its clients, but separated from the community to give its clients the opportunity to heal and regain agency. You are not given the address to the shelter until you pass a background check as a volunteer or you are en route because of a DV issue and everyone must sign a confidentiality agreement. The liminality of the shelter reflects the liminality of the clients: the shelter is part of the community, but separate to protect itself, much like the clients who must leave their current situations to move toward a life free of violence. That journey starts with walking through the front door.

To enter the shelter, you must first ring an intercom system, while being recorded by several overt cameras. A volunteer receptionist or staff advocate will ask for identification and check your statements against the day’s appointments (counseling, business related, or volunteers), known security concerns (pictures and descriptions of abusers), and a list of current clients. No one child enters Helpmate without following this procedure. If you pass the security checks, a loud clack unlocks the front door, and you must push with great force to move into the reception area on the top floor of the shelter.

Once inside the reception area, you are still a locked steel door away from the clients inside. The overt security and blandness outside changes into a soothing room painted pale yellow with dark wood trim bathed in natural light from the back yard. The inviting atmosphere is both welcoming and businesslike. Brochures for available services line the reception desk and plaques thanking benefactors line the walls.

The cameras hanging from the ceiling are harder to notice than those outside, small plastic black domes hide the security measures. The security at the shelter is designed with intentionality; the cameras outside the building are looming and omnipresent, warning the world to stay outside. The cameras inside are subtle, visible enough, so clients know that security is in place but not enough to be intrusive.

Often, the receptionist will direct you to the bottom of the stairs to the “triage” area, where the counseling offices are located. In these offices, advocates assist clients both current and former, as well as people from the community who have court mandated counseling sessions. Alternatively, the receptionist will ask you to wait for an advocate to address your needs while motioning to a black chair with a basket full of magazines beside it. If you are entering the main

area of the shelter, another security procedure leads you through another steel door that makes a distinctly mechanical winding sound when unlocked.

You have moved from the unknown outside the shelter to inside the waiting area, all of which are designed to provide protection and promote professionalism and welcome. On the other side of the doorway a home appears created to promote healing and agency through intentionality.

### **Feeding And Healing the Soul: The Kitchen And Dining Area**

On the other side of the door, the dining room is alive with activity as the pleas and squeals of babies echo in the halls and an episode of *SpongeBob* answers back from the family room. Toddlers are often fed while sitting in strollers to focus their attention; they crawl out of these strollers when moms turn their backs. Wee babies are fed on the nipple or from the bottle. Women without children support those that do. Older women cradle babies with reminiscing eyes and learned hands. Teens help their mothers with the breakfast ritual with equal parts duty and angst.

At the back of the dining room is a door leading to the smoker's porch and the backyard. The smoker's porch is actually a covered deck with several patinated metal chairs around a glass-covered table strewn with ashtrays. The smoker's porch overlooks a spacious back yard that is surrounded by a 10 ft. security fence lined with pampas grass, a vegetable garden that rotates with the seasons, and seating for picnics or reflection. The outside area is at once liberating and controlled; it is reminiscent of a meditation garden but with security measures in place.

The clients often talk with each other out back, providing a sense of community and a shared mission of healing. The smoker's porch is more than a place to exercise a habit; it is a place to exercise one's agency by taking some time for oneself or sharing the day's events with others. The freedom to take a few moments for yourself is often rare in abusive relationships. In addition, the back yard has a newly landscaped area with a wooden play set with swings, a slide, and monkey bars so that children can have some time for themselves, as well. Advocates take children to play, while their mothers attend counseling sessions or meet with governmental and community agencies. Mothers can also watch children in the backyard through windows while they prepare meals in the kitchen.

The kitchen is the center of the universe at Helpmate, with the smoker's porch tied with the family room for second place. Mornings are staggered at the shelter; not every client has children to get ready for school, and some are certainly not morning people. The kitchen starts to percolate along with the coffee around 6 AM and does not slow down until 10 AM; no worries, lunch is around the corner. The office staff arrives around 8 AM, generally to the wafting aroma of bacon sizzling and the ping of cereal hitting the bottom of bowls. The kitchen is quite large and has two black topped stoves with chrome accents: one that is well worn from use and another that is all shiny and new.

What you eat depends on what you have to eat. Sounds obvious, but simple matters are always complicated at the shelter. Many women arrive at the shelter with no food and no money. The shelter cannot afford to keep everyone fed, and part of Helpmate's healing modalities are regaining agency. Women must obtain their own groceries, prepare their own food, and take care of their own messes. What happens when there is no money for food? First, Helpmate assists clients in navigating the morass of government assistance programs. Second, no one goes hungry at Helpmate; there is a pantry filled at all times with staples, provided by the community and

Manna Food Bank. Typically, the residents also help each other out, sharing food and cooking together. The socialization of the kitchen does not change behind the locked doors of the shelter.

Lunch is more relaxed but begins as soon as breakfast is over. Meals consist of simple sandwiches to cans of soup or more elaborate fare such as sumptuous home cooked meals of fried chicken with multiple sides or spaghetti with meatballs. Many clients find peace in the preparation of their sustenance, a peace that has been missing. One way an abuser controls the abused is by taking away choice; it may be difficult to believe but eating what you want to for the first time in years without fear of retribution or judgment can be a transcendent and delightful experience. Not to worry, the chaos returns, hungry children descend like locusts after school.

“Mommy, Mommy, MOMMY! Pay attention to me the most earth shattering, exciting, stupendous, transcendent, supercalifragilisticexpialidocious event happened in school today.” Teens text and brood, mothers listen, babies gurgle, toddlers recreate escaping from Alcatraz, sound bounces off the walls, aroma fill the air, the voices merge into a din; life goes on, and so it goes. The kitchen is alive with activity at this time as the office staff leaves for the day to replay a similar scene in their own homes. The sun begins to get lower in the sky and supper begins. Clients who have been in the shelter a while learn to eat early to avoid the mad rush of not enough burners and too many hungry children. The events of breakfast and lunch replay, friendships, begin; little squabbles erupt, and a little normalcy returns to the lives of the clients. Typically, everyone helps everyone else; a community develops amongst the clients. The community grows and changes with the constant influx of new clients entering as others leave hopefully towards a life less violent.

The kitchen is also where celebrations occur. Often as clients and children leave the shelter, they will make a special meal commemorating their time or as a thank you to the advocates. At times, these events are quite lavish and smiles line the halls. The holidays are celebrated in the kitchen, as well. Birthday supplies are always on hand; Thanksgiving is a family meal shared by staff and clients, and Christmas, is, well, Christmas, with gifts donated by the community. Helpmate is a home, and the kitchen is the center of that home. The kitchen is always occupied, and one meal leads to the next. The kitchen brings comfort in a time of chaos. The kitchen is Helpmate’s soul, nourishing the body and building family ties much like the family room just down the hall.



Figure 1. Pantry

## **Building Kinship And Rebuilding Families: The Family Room**

The family room at Helpmate is remarkable because it is unremarkable. It is a stereotypical family room in the United States. This is intentional. By creating a sense of regularity, Helpmate creates an environment for healing to begin and develop. The family room is where the burdens of the day wash away with shared giggles and entertainment. Children learn to play with each other and women talk about their lives, in comfort and security, which for many has been lacking for years. The kitchen and family room are simple reminders of the comforts of home.

The family room has a communal phone that all the clients in the shelter share. The phone rings constantly as phone calls are returned to clients by loved ones, governmental agencies, and often, abusers who get the number. When the phone rings, anyone can answer it and then either try to find the person the call is for or take a message; often the response to the person on the other end of the line is: there is no one here by that name. The phone is the client's link to the outside world, but one they control.

Next to the phone is a glass-fronted fireplace with the little ones' art festooning the mantle, displaying the works of diminutive Rembrandts and Pollocks. Art is essential at Helpmate, and the nooks and crannies are covered in artwork created by clients, not just in the family room but also throughout the shelter. There are words of encouragement, abstract lines of elegant black and flourishes of color. The art evokes pain leaving the body and hope returning. Helpmate responds to the abilities of the advocates to create tools to heal the community. This is reflected by the use of the feminist empowerment model, not only for the clients, but for the advocates, as well. Advocates embrace their talents and unique personalities to engage with clients through their strengths and the shelter reflects the passion of the individuals coming together for a common goal. Jodi and another Case Manager created an art program at the shelter to serve as a "learning tool, a way to process what's happened...women who have recently come into the shelter just seem to be bursting to get something out and feel themselves again."

Created in-house, the program developed when the advocates saw a need that their talents could help. Eventually, the Window Between Worlds program, a national nonprofit organization dedicated to the use of art as therapy, provided additional training and a grant for the purchase of art supplies. Jodi stated that many clients ask if they "can continue to come to art classes after they leave the shelter." Jodi believes this is because "in art class, individuals can be fully present in a safe space to address their emotions, dream of what's to come, or examine what they've experienced and learned in the past."

The art program is not only for the adult clients but also for their children. The youngest victims of DV have to work out what is happening in their own lives, often wondering why they live somewhere new or when will they see the rest of their family again. They pour out emotion and uncertainty with crayons and glue. The resulting pieces are artifacts of treatment and glimpses of their souls built one colored pencil at a time.

Their art speaks like their mothers'. Some art appears blissfully unaware, a credit to the mothers and advocates of Helpmate that make children a priority, to shelter them the best they can. These children are smart though; they were raised in the same home, and many felt the same abuse. Frequently, some were taken away from the abuse just in time because a mother can shoulder the hurt to protect her children, but she finally leaves when she knows her children are in imminent danger.<sup>7</sup> The tears of children are often too hard to ignore.

Helpmate uses the same intentionality to promote healing in the littlest clients as well, by taking care of the needs of children perhaps the intergenerational cycle of violence can stop. One way is creating a safe space for play and socialization. The family room has a bookcase filled with opportunities to stimulate the mind and offer relaxation. The books are donated to the shelter or left by previous clients; there are holy works, romance novels, children's picture books, and self-help guides. The toys are on the top shelves to keep them from the curious hands of youngsters until mom lets them play with them, matchbox cars and dolls mingle on the shelf, lying in wait for imaginations to run wild. Of course, some toys are always on the floor.

There is a balcony overlooking down town Asheville. From the balcony, the sunrises and sunsets are framed by the Blue Ridge Mountains, casting a calming glow over the viewer. The busy machinations of Asheville are reminders that, for women in the shelter, the world continues outside of the walls. Sirens wail, buses continue on their routes; rush hour comes and goes, all while victims of violence are trying to become survivors, to return outside the walls and regain a sense of normality.

Once you are inside the main part of the shelter and past security measures, the intentionality of creating a safe space is clear. The warmth of the dining area, the comfort of the kitchen, and the communal experience of the family room are designed to promote healing and agency. However, this home in a shelter has bills to pay, has budget concerns, maintenance issues, and the grass needs to be mowed much like other homes on the other side of the steel doors. The intentionality of the shelter embodied in the walls springs forth from the professional and volunteer advocates, the Helpers of Helpmate. This is where the home-like feel of Helpmate changes, there is a liminal space inside this liminal space.



Figure 2. Art Therapy

### **The Helpers Of Helpmate: Office Space**

There are five offices, a conference room, and a common workspace that combine to make the administrative side of Helpmate. Walking into the common workspace at the end of the hall reminds you that Helpmate is a non-profit company with employees. Entering the room, you first encounter a large white dry erase board directly in front of you. This board is the “thank you board” where advocates write messages of encouragement to other advocates. There is a bulletin board filled with official notices from the North Carolina Worker’s Compensation Commission,

the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, and the Department of Labor. These notices are required to be posted in any place of employment and Helpmate is no different.

All of the offices are similar, but on one bookcase there are informational fact sheets, such as “Signs of a Battering Personality” and statistics about DV. Infographics describing the cycle of violence and illustrating the power dynamics of an abusive relationship are paper clipped and collated. Bumper stickers proclaiming, “Real Men Don’t Hit Women” and “Peace on Earth Begins at Home” inspire the community to be visually vocal about changing DV one stoplight at a time. Informational brochures outlining the services that Helpmate offers come in two sizes, brochures designed for potential donors or volunteers and business card tri-folds for purses and wallets intended for potential clients. These brochures and tri-fold cards come in both English and Spanish versions. There is also a Wish List of supplies the shelter needs; there are never enough diapers, paper towels, or food - every little bit helps.

The ubiquitous Hotline number dapples every piece of advocacy information. Helpmate provides a 24-hour Hotline operated by a staff member or volunteer advocate who will answer the phone and assess the situation. The ring of the Hotline is one of the most controlling sounds at the shelter, second only to the intruder alarm.

One office, however, is different from the others; this is the Case Manager’s office. It is designed to be comforting and welcoming, merging the home of the shelter with the office inside the shelter. The choices that clients must make often happen in the Case Manager’s office. The room filled with informative documents and artwork but also comfortable seating and ambient lighting. The room is filled with information related to services that can help the clients and many are in Spanish (Helpmate has bilingual counselors as well). Among these is the North Carolina Statewide Automated Victim Assistance and Notification (SAVAN) program that alerts victims of DV that abusers prior to release from prison and Carolina Outreach, which provides mental health services to families. Similar to the home part of the shelter there is artwork on the walls and affirmations to promote healing and merge the two worlds of Helpmate. In this office, there are two posters, one that says, “When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion” and the other has a quote from Audre Lorde, “When I dare to be powerful-to use my strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.”

The posters mirror the decisions clients must make. The Case Managers guide clients, but do not give directives. Clients make their own decisions for themselves and their families. Helpmate heals by helping the powerless regain their sense of self and agency by helping them navigate government resources to find housing, job placement, and with legal issues. By providing information and encouragement to its clients, Helpmate starts the process of rebuilding lives fractured by violence; that journey includes many decisions in this room. Leaving the administrative side of Helpmate, when you venture down stairs, you are in a home once again.

### **A Safe Space: Dormitories**

At the bottom of the stairs are five bedrooms for clients, an “overnight room” for the advocates, a laundry room, and two storage areas. In one storage room, you are met by several clothing racks for women and children, plastic containers full of baby clothing and shoe racks; above these clothes sit paint cans and maintenance supplies. At Helpmate, space is always at a premium because there are never enough beds to meet the needs of the community. Helpmate is a home, but it is a shelter and run like a business, no one is helped if the lights are turned out. Helpmate

attends to as many needs of the clients as it can with the resources it has while staying mindful of empowering the clients to regain their agency.

Past the clothes, on the left side of the room is another door leading to a larger storage area. In this room, Helpmate keeps client files going back decades, extra food, and supplies for the aforementioned art program. In a crawl space above the third refrigerator at the shelter, holiday decorations are stored, with wrapping paper and wreaths awaiting another winter. This room also has emergency supplies ready for preplanned and practiced procedures in case of power outages or other calamities. Helpmate has to think ahead, to heal the hurt before it happens. In the other storage room cleaning supplies, both industrial strength and household line the walls. Rolls of toilet paper and paper towels are stacked deep on the shelves. One set of shelves is filled with numerous packs of diapers and baby wipes of every size. This room also has most of the supplies, including book bags, paper, and pencils, that a child requires for school.

The storage rooms are another liminal space inside a liminal space. All of Helpmates identities combine in the storage rooms. Decades of paperwork reside next to holiday ornaments, merging the office and the home. Emergency supplies sit next to crayons because Helpmate must prepare for the worst while thinking about playtime. Chemicals to kill pests and clean stains are housed next to high-heels and second hand clothes for job interviews. If the dining room, kitchen, and family room are the heart of Helpmate and the offices are the mind, then the storage room is the soul where everything combines and reflects back the duality of a liminal place.

The final aspect of creating a home within Helpmate is the bedrooms, and each one has a single bed, two beds bunked together, a walk-in closet, and a chest of draws. The clients share a bathroom with the room next door. These rooms are reminiscent of a college dormitory, and all the furniture is built with utility in mind. Clients decorate their room while they are there to make it feel more like their own space. Helpmate spends a great deal of time and expense maintaining these rooms to present a welcoming atmosphere. The clients are not the only ones that stay overnight in the shelter.

The overnight room is where advocates stay during late-night shifts. The shelter is always staffed by one or more advocates with additional staff on-call for emergencies. The overnight room is similar to the client rooms except that it has more storage for shelter supplies. Upon entering, an unshared bathroom is on the left, and a linen closet is on the right. The bathroom is the same except for additional creature comforts for the staff.

Self-care of the advocates is essential, and burnout is common in the nonprofit arena, particularly when dealing with DV. On average, a new staff member stays at Helpmate for 1.5 years but many advocates have been there for a decade or more. Learning self-care and coping skills allow the advocates to focus on the clients. If the advocates cannot take care of themselves, they cannot help the clients. The shelter has a weekly meeting for the staff to come together and discuss their shared experiences, to encourage and assist each other by lending an understanding ear or a supportive shoulder. Many of the advocates stay overnight at the shelter as part of their regular shifts, living in the same space as the clients, experiencing a sense of place together, co-creating a home.

The overnight room is where the advocates are supposed to sleep. However, DV does not stop when the sun goes down. The overnight room also houses many daily-living supplies. The linen closet is filled with feminine hygiene products, first aid supplies, tools, and of course linens. Returning to the room, there is a double bed with a security screen and intercom next to it. The clients and advocates live very similarly at the shelter, creating a cohesively shared experience to promote healing. The advocates, many who have directly or indirectly experienced DV are

acutely aware of how clients experience the shelter and go to great lengths to improve the experience. The overnight room is where the home part of the shelter merges with the administrative side; the advocates and clients are existing in the same, but still, a different liminal space. Outside of the overnight room is another door that leads back toward the world beyond the shelter.

### **Listening And Healing: The Counseling Center**

The steel door has a distinct whirling and grinding sound when unlocked; upon entering the room you see a stairway leading back upstairs and an office suite on the right. The floor has soiled green carpet and is missing in some places. The walls are painted the same pale yellow as the reception area. The shelter has flooding issues in this area. Due to budgetary concerns, several stopgap measures were attempted and failed, but the situation is unavoidable. The shelter is raising money for a permanent solution. There is mustiness in the air and lingering darkness due to low lighting but volunteers and advocates regularly clean the carpets, and efforts are increasing to improve the inviting feeling of this area.

These offices are similar to the administrative offices on the top floor; the primary difference is they are outside of the living space of the shelter. Many people from the area use Helpmate's counseling services that have not nor ever will stay inside the shelter. Walking out of the counseling office into the waiting area, information lines the walls to your right, with a staircase in front of you. Pamphlets from nonprofit and government agencies are displayed in racks. Most of the information is bilingual and covers topics as broad as prenatal care, housing, legal matters, and local food banks. There is a stark contrast to this space, as opposed to the other side of the door. While it is welcoming and has the same feel as the Case Manager's office it is more formal. It is the chamber between the worlds inside and outside the shelter, another liminal space. As you walk up the stairs, you are bathed in natural light as you return to the reception area, indicating the movement from one liminal space to another. At the top of the stairs, you can either return to the home built though intentionality on your right or return to the outside world on your left.

### **Conclusion**

You are where you began. Healing at Helpmate is intentional. Every aspect of the shelter is monitored and reevaluated to promote healing, including the color of the walls, the artwork, and the sense of community. The security measures before you enter the shelter give clients an immediate sense of security and advocates too. The advocates are also in danger from abusers who are trying to find the abused. Incidents have happened at the shelter involving clients, advocates, and abusers but luckily, these events are rare. Entering the shelter you are greeted by a volunteer or advocate to a welcoming space and assisted to your destination. If you are going to see a counselor, you are led downstairs, and if you are entering the shelter you are let inside. The liminality of the world outside fades into the healing space inside.

The kitchen, dining room, back yard, and family room all invite clients to come inside, relax and focus on healing, not the constant threat of abuse. The kitchen serves to feed the body while healing the soul; the dining room creates a safe space for families to bond; the back yard is for sitting and kids to frolic, and finally the family room is devoted to sharing quality time with others. Helpmate is the home that many clients long for and perhaps can find or create after leaving the shelter through their own efforts and those of the staff.

The advocates at the shelter work with intentionality to promote healing. The administrative offices have caring advocates working together to prevent and react to DV. While Helpmate is a shelter, it is important to remember that it is also a place of employment with the same struggles and concerns of any other job. The staff has lives that exist independent of the shelter. The advocates have to be vigilant not to let their work impact their private lives. It is important that the staff practices self-care so they can maintain a place of healing. Helpmate has many identities and liminal spaces, but every aspect is focused on healing and regaining agency. If you need it, the shelter and advocates will always be there. Helpmate is a house of healing, welcome home.

### **Author's Note**

Over 100 photos were taken during this project but only a limited amount were included due to understandable page limits. This paper is a continuation of previous ethnographic work and contains previously published content. Certain security details and names have been changed to protect Helpmate's advocates and clients. The author of this paper this paper is a 35-year-old male that interned at Helpmate.

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