

All they want for Christmas is a home

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BALTIMORE - Erika, 7 years old, moves across the room and plops herself down on a chair. She doesn't walk so much as prance. She says she'd like something called Dora the Talking Stove for Christmas, and that'll be enough for now. Where would she put anything else? She lives at Sarah's Hope, which is a shelter for the homeless.

"That's all?" she's asked. "Just the stove?"

"My mom and dad said I could get one present for Christmas," she says, "but then, when we get our own place, I can get 12 more presents."

She glances over at her father, who winks back affirmation.

"In January," he says.

"When we have \$400," says Erika.

"We'll have more than that," her dad assures her.

"Probably in the two hundreds," says Erika, slightly shaky in her arithmetic.

They've been here since June. They share the place with 147 others. "We're full-up," says [Amanda Morgan](#), director of the northern [Baltimore County](#) shelter, just off [Franklin Square Drive](#), run by [St. Vincent de Paul of Baltimore](#).

Sarah's Hope sleeps about 50 to a room. Most sleep on the floor, on mats, though here and there are cots residents have brought with them. There's a Christmas tree in the corner of a room, with presents on the floor, and a back room with toys to be given out on the big day.

Much effort is made to make this feel as comfortable as possible. But it's not easy. And now Christmas arrives, and then the new year, and you walk through the place and see the soul-deadening effects on people who have lost everything and don't know when they'll begin to get it back.

There are women sitting on metal folding chairs with eyes dead as tombstones. There are men sitting with children in their laps, looking forlorn because they believe they've let their families down. They are white and black, and they had homes and jobs, and some of them still work. But not enough to keep up with the rent.

Here and there, children just getting to know each other get on each other's nerves a little bit. There are dozens of them. They're just kids, and there's no real harm done in their teasing. But it's an expression of their edginess, and a symptom of too many children in too small an environment, and a general end-of-day exhaustion before a modest dinner is served.

"How about school?" someone asks Erika.

"Shady Spring Elementary," she says.

"Do you like it?"

"I liked it better last year at Woodmoor Elementary."

"What's the matter with Shady Spring?"

"There's a mean little girl in my class," she says. "And she doesn't know anything but one-times-one."

Erika knows better. She can multiply and she can read and she wants to teach science one day. She is irrepressibly upbeat and charming and flirty. But she's sitting here now with two parents who are hoping to get out of here early next year, and then hoping they can stay out.

"It's a killer," says Erika's dad. "It's the worst thing that ever happened in my life."

He says they were living in [Randallstown](#) and he was managing a [Pizza Hut](#). He got laid off. It didn't help that he had no car. His wife, now cradling Erika in her lap, says she was working for [Wal-Mart](#) but was laid off. They fell so far behind in the rent that they were evicted.

"We're not the kind of people that get evicted," says Erika's father. "We're working people. We're working now."

The mother's just gotten a job as a cashier at Royal Farms. He's now working on a trash truck for a private company. He's hoping for a pretty good return from the [IRS](#). This, he says, should be enough for a security deposit on an apartment.

But they're like a lot of American families, in cities and in suburbs, living from paycheck to paycheck and hoping to hold onto their jobs — and their homes.

Outside Sarah's Hope, the wind snaps and crackles. Inside is a refuge, but the setting's pretty spare. There are lockers along a wall for storing personal items, and staff members extend all the human warmth possible.

But residents are one step from standing in that bitter wind. The grown-ups sit there with their thousand-yard stares. And the kids, even the irrepressible ones like Erika, hope for a present or two on Christmas Day and tell themselves better days are coming.

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