

At St. John's by-the-Sea, 'you're part of an ohana'

By Pat Gee, *Honolulu Star-Advertiser*

May 7, 2016

It's Tori Tualatamalelagi's job to make sure the families who come to her Kahaluu church for dinner and a place to sleep have what they need and feel secure in what will be their home for a week.

"And in our Hawaiian way, to malama (take care of) them," she added. For 10 years Tualatamalelagi has been coordinator of the Family Promise program at St. John's by-the-Sea Episcopal Church, which, in turn, relies on the support of several churches in the Kaneohe/Kahaluu area.



Since 2006 Family Promise has been sheltering homeless families in churches until they are able to afford their own places to live.

At the door she hurries kids to wash their hands for dinner. Quick with a laugh, she confesses to being "like everyone's auntie," a bit bossy and always ready to "talk story — I find out things about them and try to help them."

At St. John's, Tualatamalelagi said, "You're not coming to a program; you're coming to your auntie's house. You're expected to eat leftovers, to help clean up. You're really not a guest; you're part of an ohana." She packs leftovers for family lunches and scoots everyone out the door to work or school at 7 a.m.

Tualatamalelagi sleeps in one of the cubicles five nights a week, supervising up to five families (14 people) at a time, while other churches cover the remaining two nights. Families in the program stay with a church from Sunday evening to the following Sunday morning, then move on to the next church in the program's rotation.

St. John's serves as a host site for families in need in the first week of February, May, August and November, Tualatamalelagi said, adding that she has seen many return two or three times.

At the end of every weeklong stay, Tualatamalelagi gathers everyone for pule (prayer) before they leave. "I tell them, 'I hope I never see you again in this program' because if I do, that means they didn't find a home. But I tell them, 'You can come here anytime you need anything.'"

As a single mother who raised a son on one income, Tualatamalelagi identifies with the homeless — "I am them. I am one paycheck away from where they're at. I'm just lucky I live on my family's property. I walk in the shoes they walk in."

"Every time I get tired of doing this or start to grumble, then they walk in and there's a family with babies. They don't need to be out on the street or living in cars on the beach with babies."

Some of the families are those she's seen around the neighborhood, so when they enter Family Promise, "I say, 'Yeah, baby! You're doing it!'"

Tualatamalelagi has recruited other churches in the Kaneohe/Kahaluu area to help with food and other supplies, as St. John's membership is small and aging, she said. Neighbors down the road also pitch in with dinner and donations.

With so many helping, "It's not a burden on St. John's, and nobody gets burned out." The other volunteers feel this is "their kuleana (responsibility), too — they're very committed and Christian. ... It's what you're supposed to do."

Regular support is provided by the Kahaluu United Methodist Church, Hope Chapel Kahaluu, Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Kailua, Calvary Episcopal Church in Kaneohe and St. Ann Church in Kaneohe.