

# Mom, daughter beat homelessness

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KITTERY, Maine — After spending almost a year and a half of her life without one, Kechia Gillen can't and won't take home for granted.

The Fair Tide resident and her daughter, Elizabeth, have lived in an apartment provided by the transitional housing program since August 2008. Before that, they bounced from shelter to shelter, living in Cross Roads House in Portsmouth and a Christian rehabilitation center in Manchester.



Kechia Gillen and her daughter, Elizabeth, speak about how much Fair Tide in Kittery, Maine, has helped them out of homelessness and into stability. Deb Cram/dcram@seacoastonline.com

Hoping to break the cycle, Gillen applied to Fair Tide and was initially rejected, before Program Director Mary Oplinger encouraged her to try again and she was accepted in 2008.

For Kechia, a Boston native who moved to New Hampshire when she was young, her troubles began when she was arrested in Laconia and pled guilty to a felony-level offense, which she did not name but said was not related to violence. When she got out of prison, she found she had nowhere to go.

"I made some bad decisions," she acknowledged, and said that being both homeless and a convicted felon proved to be marks against her as she struggled to right the proverbial ship.

Elizabeth said she was injured after being hit by a car while her mother was in prison.

After her mother was notified that she was in the hospital, Elizabeth said her mom was heartbroken that she could not visit her only daughter.

Things became tougher when she got out of prison because she was precluded from applying for Section 8 and other aid, and Cross Roads House was the only place that would take her in.

Gillen said it was initially tense at Fair Tide when she and Elizabeth lived in a single-bedroom apartment. Having lived in shelters for so long, she said, her first months were "rebellious" and she had difficulty adjusting as she worked through the financial and self-esteem issues brought on by homelessness.

Oplinger said it's not uncommon for new residents to have problems adjusting to a "quiet, normal existence" in a home.

"When you're homeless, your life is always in chaos," she said.

For the Gillens, though, life has slowly changed for the better. Kechia is working at a culinary business and taking both business and culinary college preparatory courses in hopes of "climbing up the ladder" at her job. Elizabeth is a student at Shapleigh Middle School. During the summer she helps with gardening and the United Way Day of Caring in Kittery. Both said they've grown closer with more room in their apartment.

Oplinger said there are 10 residents currently living in the yellow multi-family building in Kittery, a transitional housing program that helps those who were formerly homeless, living in shelters or drifting between living with friends and family. It's often a challenge for residents, who may be dealing with past debts, legal troubles, or health and mental health issues, to get back on their feet.

In spite of all that, Oplinger said the program has a graduation rate of about 80 percent.

"Our goal for them is to put them in permanent housing when they leave," Oplinger said. "We want (them) to learn self-sufficiency."

Those who do move on still have Fair Tide to help them, Oplinger said. The organization, which has struggled with funding cuts, tries to provide help each step of the way.

Kechia Gillen said she is not sure where she'll be one year from now, but with her newfound stability and confidence she hopes there will be brighter days ahead, thanks in large part to her time with Fair Tide.

"It has definitely shown me that I can do it. I can be on my own," Gillen said. "I'm making myself stronger and showing that not everyone that comes out of a shelter or is a convicted felon continues on that chronic path."