

Fulcrum Podcast Episode 3: A Pathway to Permanency

September 2019 (Sherry and Stephen Danalis, [F.U.S.E.](#))

Urban Alliance (urbanalliance.com/fulcrum)

Jaleith Gary In today's episode, I had the pleasure of meeting Steve and Sherry Danalis, the founders of F.U.S.E., or Families United Serving and Embracing, to learn more about the work they're doing to help homeless expecting mothers overcome challenges meet their goals and live lives beyond their dreams.

I'm just really grateful and I feel blessed to be able to be the person who gets to talk to you all about the amazing work you're doing. Why don't you just take a moment to introduce yourselves to our listeners.

Stephen Danalis Thank you for having us here today. My name's Steve Danalis, I and my bride Sherry Danalis grew up in North Granby, Connecticut. We have a home where we help young ladies that are in homeless pregnant situations. We've been doing it for 36 months. We love it and this is what we've been doing.

Jaleith Gary So Sherry, can you tell me a little bit about the need that you've been seeing in the community?

Sherry Danalis The need has to do with the demographics. The women we serve are between the ages of 18 to 23. We have recognized that this is the most underserved demographic of women because they're unaccounted for. They're couch surfing. They're in situations where they don't know that they can go get resources. So a lot of them are put in a lot of vulnerable places where even if they go to a shelter if they're pregnant sometimes they're turned away; if they're not having substance abuse they're turned away because there's programs that are either for domestic violence or substance abuse. But if you don't have any of those other ailments or society ailments there's really no safe place for her to live out a pregnancy if she's struggling to find a home or shelter.

Jaleith Gary Wow, that's terrible. Actually, I was reading the news story that Sarah wrote called "A Home That's Saving Lives," and I was reading Henasi's story and one of the things you said in there was that of the list of places that she was given, none of them—like, most of them were shelters—and you all were literally the only place that she could go.

Sherry Danalis Yes she was. She said I really didn't want to come to a program and really wanted to be in a shelter because they don't want someone telling them what to do. But when they come in, they're experiencing family. It's not a program. And so we really are reparenting and they're really getting the concept of what true family looks like. And so we find that we get the opportunity to reparent and give them the skills that they need to succeed. So it's not your normal shelter.

It's not a transitional home. We call it a transformational home.

Jaleith Gary Oh yeah. I like that.

Stephen Danalis Transformative, really. And it's always been through the grace of God, you know. Again, having a loving family. People aren't punching in at our home. They live with us. And that's kind of the prototype that we're working on for the future of F.U.S.E. And what we do is have a house parent model, have dinner with them and be a mom and a papa. You help them get through just so much brokenness. They're 18 to 24; they're aged out of DCF; their homeless situation; they've been abandoned. It's a fatherless and motherless society that is just overwhelming and they get to come and live with us. We just love on them.

Jaleith Gary That's awesome. Can one of you talk to me about what it looks like for someone to just find out about your program and kind of walk through the steps that they would go through to be in the program.

Sherry Danalis OK. So being the program, you're first going to go through a set of interviews with our intake person to make sure that this young lady is ready for the model of time or a model of the program, that she is committed, because if you're not committed to having a pathway and getting on your feet and having that permanent life then maybe we're not for you. So there is a screening process that happens. Most of our women come to us through mobile units, pregnancy resource centers, or word of mouth, churches that we have network with, but they also have Google Analytics and so when a woman searches for a safe place or pregnancy home she will get through, I think it's called "A Little Flower House" in Rhode Island. And then they go ahead and channel all the different references for the lady to reach out to different programs. So that's where we have been getting the women. We're not really set up for a huge amount of women because we've been piloting this program for the last three years. But we're seeing the need more and more because we're waitlisting. And, so yeah, we're seeing that this model actually works because we have taken a young lady who has been pregnant and homeless under three years ago and she's about to be a homeowner.

So, the pathway that we provide is called the Rooted Program. So when she comes in, she's gonna get a handbook; she's gonna understand it's going to be her obligation to meet us halfway. We're going to be there to support you but you're also gonna have to do your work—to make sure that you have the financial literacy, you have a driver's license, you have a GED if that's what you want. We're trying to equip her so that she is in the best position when she leaves the house; she is equipped for independence and adulthood.

Stephen Danalis And the opportunity that we have to serve is just amazing. Well, number one, they said yes to their baby, made in His image. And then secondly, we've really recognized we've got two generations in front of us right. Two generations. We've got a young blood, twenty-two-year-old and we have a baby. And if we can help, in the name of Jesus, you know help renew their minds, renew their spirit. It's just been such brokenness that it does take one, two plus years to lift them up; to cheerlead them on; to be the mom and the papa; to give them the resources. You know us 50 year olds are connected with so many resources that they are not connected with.

Sherry Danalis And the social capital because they don't have the relationships that we have. And so, where we have the ability to connect them to jobs, connect them to a resource for education and continuing their education at no cost, even getting them health care, getting them relationships with mentorships and life coaches because you know studies have shown and research has shown that if a caring adult is in a young person's life for one to two years that person's ability to be able to finish school, to get in an apartment and stay in that apartment and have that guidance is that they have a better outcome.

Jaleith Gary Oh, wow. That's really encouraging.

Stephen Danalis That's definitely a fact: two to three years for that pathway. And we really tell them it's a hand up. We don't want it to be a handout. Life's about seasons. OK, yes, we need help from the State. Yes, we need food stamps. Yes, we need some vouchers. But we try to help them [understand] that this is just a season in their lives. It's not forever. We let them know that they can be a homeowner. And they're shocked when we got three ladies that have permits that we help them get permits. Three ladies are getting cars because they've been donated once they're able to afford them. These are big major milestone and becoming an adult. It's an honor to be part of that.

Jaleith Gary You mentioned earlier, "waitlists". So you have—how many would you say you have on your waitlist?

Sherry Danalis It moves to two to three at a time because of the urgency of the situation. And depending on how committed they are. Because sometimes they hear that they have to abide by rules or they have to abide by curfews or they have to abide by these certain restrictions. Sometimes—it will be probably two months later—we'll hear back from them again and they're back on the list because they have exhausted every avenue and they're at a time crunch. So it's always plan B, plan C, but then God always orchestrates the ones that need to come in who are ready because at this point they know they have exhausted every other avenue.

So it's just the grace and the patience of God really to orchestrate those who really need the help and who have exhausted every other avenue that they finally land in the house.

Jaleith Gary So when we think about the gravity of the need and the urgency of the situation, what are some ways that people can kind of come around what you all are doing to be ready and available when you do have a crisis like a waitlist, or like you don't have enough room? Because I wonder what it would look like for the waitlists to never have to exist.

Stephen Danalis So one of the things that we kind of really started was safe families, safe-families.org, is having the opportunity to speak at a few churches. If we had one person per church that had it in their heart, I mean you really have to have a calling to open your home and have somebody stay with you for a year. So what we were working on is us to be the hub. We've got a plan for the young ladies. And if they stay with us for six, eight, nine months - that there is another home. We don't need to own everything. F.U.S.E. does not need to own everything. But if we could engage 10 or 12 families in New England that would open up their home for a year—that they could go and this woman or family could host them and help them for that second year. That's one of the things that we like to do is engage the church if people have this calling. We certainly have to train the people that are going to do this because we all want to “fix” one another. We'll let God do the fixing and we'll just be the hands and feet of God. You know, “talk less, do more” type of preaching—that's what the Holy Spirit does. That's a part of what we do.

Sherry Danalis And I think the access or engaging the funnel of engagement is to start as a friend or a coach. Build that relationship so you feel comfortable taking that next step to be a host. Because once you build a relationship and you find the need that that mom needs somewhere else to go, you're going to have that infrastructure already there so you can host that young woman without all the trepidation because we kind of work that out before they even go into your home. We find that a lot of seniors are living

alone and this could be a very potential pathway for a young lady and the senior that both needs are met.

She can do light housekeeping. She can run errands. She can be there at night if that person, especially a senior, wants to stay in their home. There's this emerging idea that's even all over the landscape that multi-generations can help each other. And so even creating a pathway or even a fee system where a young lady can go there with her child or pregnant and she can help that elder person and that elder person can turn around and be that mentor and that you know that missing gap of that generational wisdom. And just the experience that they already raised their children and maybe they're grandparents and it's a beautiful, I believe, Kingdom model of what family looks like in the earth.

Stephen Danalis One of the things we found unique was when we first started. Is there a need for this? The answer is yes. After 36 months. Yes.

And so out of Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston they have bridges for moms. They had found out that there's a lot of couch surfing going on with, again, aged out foster women that are pregnant in homeless situations. So they have a study. They have a program there as well. And we're like "OK, good." So it's nice to know there's more data and more information. Again, we don't know the statistics or what's really going on in that because again if you're on drugs, OK there's a home for that. If there's domestic violence there's a home for that. But a pregnant not drugged out young lady is in a situation.

Because we all want life, right. We want life made in His image.

Sherry Danalis We can have the idea that pro-life is God's plan. I mean, obviously, we're pro-life—we're supposed to be Christian, we're supposed to be pro-life. What are we doing to support that woman who chooses life? Yeah. We can go "rah rah rah choose life." But are we going to be there to pick up the pieces after the baby is born? Are we going to walk with her and make sure she doesn't fall on hard times? And I always say financial limitations are never a reason to abort a child because that is temporary and we have enough resources to make sure that she has everything she needs to be confident. Because I believe abortion says she's not really prepared or not strong enough to be a mom. And I think that's an insult on women. I believe God created us to be mothers. We all know when we carry, especially those of us who have been moms, life in its most vulnerable stages is still—you feel motherly. You feel like you need to protect them. And to have that ripped out of you and saying "well, I don't have what it takes"—I think it does more damage to that woman after she aborts and that's

why there's so much abortion after care. I don't think people understand the trauma of what that looks like. Days, months, years later it has a lingering effect.

And I believe, as people of God, we need to stand behind these women and say we're gonna be here for you and we're gonna give you everything possible to make sure that you don't end up in a very dire financial [situations], where you're just losing your children to foster care or you're just constantly in poverty. That's not what this looks like. And so we have to be more, I believe, resourceful when it comes to what we do with our time and our money. If we really believe that these children were made in the image of God then we have to do everything in what God has given us to make sure that that child comes into a safe environment and that we're there when that child is born. And, following up for at least two to three years.

Jaleith Gary Right. Those are the most vulnerable years of the child's life.

Stephen Danalis We know the church was the head of orphanages. I don't know how come we ended up taking the back seat, then the government did the best that they can do. But the church is supposed to be the head. Absolutely. You know, we focus on solutions. We're not going to fight and argue life choices but we focus on bringing solutions to this industry of brokenness that's before us, the fatherless and motherless.

Jaleith Gary So one of the things you may not know about me is that I'm part of our grant review team. And so I get to read the grant applications and represent the donor's perspective of the investment opportunity. And I know you all were awarded a grant to do some Circle of Security parenting workshops. How are those going? Have you started them yet?

Sherry Danalis Oh yes. So four of our moms have gone through it. And even for myself, I'm like, "where was this information when I was raising my own children?" It has been one powerful—it's internationally acclaimed, nationally acclaimed. It is probably one of the best series of parenting I've ever been able to even sit under. And so for young moms having that confidence that they can do this and understanding the rhythms and the flow and the tide of being, you know, with a screaming child and the attention that that child needs, it gives it more meat of what they're doing and they feel confident once they get through it they're saying "Wow, I feel really equipped to do this." So that has been one of the best grants we've ever gotten to have that Circle of Security.

Jaleith Gary That's awesome. And then I also noticed that you all have done the Ages and Stages Trainings. How are those being used within the context of your ministry?

Sherry Danalis Yes. So we are able, although we can only have children up to 1 year old but because we still continue relationships with our moms beyond our home, we're in connection with them between two to three years old they can actually come back and say "Hey, you know this milestone? They're not reaching it. I feel unconfident—my doctor says this. My pediatrician says this," but we can take them to the Ages and Stages and it just helps them to be more confident that what they're doing they're they're OK. You know, "You're doing a great job." So, I believe, those Ages and Stages—when we go through the curriculum with them, when they come back and visit "Hey, let's check the milestone." Let's do it. It's a fun activity but also brings them back to where they were. They can hang out with the other moms and it's just a great tool for understanding all the different milestones and celebrating those milestones.

Jaleith Gary Yeah. That's awesome. So is there anything that you want to share with the people who are listening? Maybe someone's running an early childhood program or maybe somebody is looking to volunteer and get involved. Or maybe there's someone from one of our participant organizations who's a leader who could partner with you all. What could that look like, even?

Sherry Danalis Yeah, so I would encourage anybody that has mothers. Obviously we know there's a lot of single moms out there as well, giving her that tool just gets her to be more confident in what she's doing because she's already feeling so much pressure to perform and the whole idea is when you give something—knowledge is power. And when you give them the tools that they need it just helps de-escalate all of that anxiety and the fear that comes with raising a child, even in the pregnancy stages going through all these different curriculums with them.

It just gives ... It sets them up for success and, you know, alleviates all of that burden of being a great parent. "Oh, I can't be a great parent." Who says you can't be a great parent? But even if your church or you're an early child development reaching that young mother who's pregnant or even a woman who's a single mom with maybe a toddler herself just having access to this curriculum, I'm telling you, it saves that mom. Because we already feel we are failures; we're not good moms. We are, you know, we're we're stretched in 100 different ways. But having these tools it just builds confidence and gives you peace that you're on track and you're doing the best that you can, but your baby really relies on you for everything. So give yourself a break. You can do this. You are equipped to be a mom.

Stephen Danalis Very good. And thank you for asking about different types of engagement. You know people ask, "What can I do?" And we don't expect all the leaders or the pastors to be the ones to say "Let me do it," but the opportunity to share with a congregation—if there's one person in the pew that has a heart for babies, pregnant moms, or even

has a spare bedroom. We almost want to make it like an Uber type of a thing, where we can create 20 homes. That we'd be the hub, and we are the hub. We receive the young ladies, help them make a plan and a strategic plan for a year or two years. And then, if there's someone [who] has an extra bedroom that would want to engage in this capacity and have that type of fellowship and then walking out your faith that's really about true Biblical hospitality. So that's, you know, that's really big, you know.

Secondly, as housing is really a big tall order. I got these beautiful young ladies. So getting them day care, a job and housing. Being single and by yourself, obviously it's a tall order. So again this is an opportunity that if anybody would want to celebrate come speak in any way—in a big way or a small way—we'd love to do that. And again, it's just an invitation. That's what it's always about. The power of invitation and for people to say yes.

Sherry Danalis Or, give them the opportunity to respond knowing that the need...because we know the mountain is great, but we don't realize that a simple “yes”, even coming alongside, being a mentor or being that shoulder or that ear to hear it—it just creates that, I say, an opportunity for you to be the hands of feet to Jesus. Yeah. And that's where just a simple yes. Spend time, shoulder to shoulder. Come hold babies. Give mom that break where she can just take a shower. Come and hold babies. They're great therapy.

Stephen Danalis Yeah it's amazing, alright. It's all about relationship. Just like with Jesus, it's all about relationship. Hanging out having a cup of coffee, having a sandwich, you know, visiting the house. You know we have open tours—again if any type of engagement, it's always an honor for us. It takes a team. It takes a team to make a dream.

Jaleith Gary And if somebody wants to get involved, how can they reach you?

Sherry Danalis so they can go to our website. It's gonna be www.ma-fuse.org. I believe you can also go on Valley Brook Community Church website and they will come up that way as well. If you have a young lady who needs to start the process we also have another website for her: www.nehemiahhouse4women.org.

Jaleith Gary Awesome. Well, I just want to say thank you to both of you for just sharing about the work that you're doing, the work that God has put on your hearts and called you to do and just thank you for answering that call and for being obedient to it. And, I know it's not easy work. I know it's, you know, emotionally draining work and physically exhausting work, but it's necessary. And I'm just so grateful that two passionate followers of Christ who are completely obedient and surrendering to Him are championing this effort and meeting the most vulnerable and standing in the gap.

So, thank you so much for doing that and for sharing with us.

Stephen Danalis Thank you and a big thank you to you and Urban Alliance. Having a partner like Urban Alliance is just...We're grateful. I just can't say enough. All types of training and resources has just definitely been a big blessing. As a non-profit you need all the help you can get.

Sherry Danalis What we say—You can't put a price on that. And so the support has been amazing..

Stephen Danalis So thank you as well. Thank you.

Jaleith Gary Thank you for joining us for today's episode. To learn more about F.U.S.E., Nehemiah House or how we're partnering together to serve and equip parents and caregivers, visit urbanalliance.com/fulcrum.