



Dory Devlin

## A godsend for homeless children

**R**ocshana Carmigniani thanks her daughter's teachers and caregivers every other day.

"I used to thank them every day," says Carmigniani, 22, of Morristown. "Everyone is so good to her."

After bringing 14-month-old Antoinette to Children on the Green in Morristown for six months, she is no longer overwhelmed by the loving, consistent care her daughter receives every day. She is simply grateful.

Every working parent wants to find high-quality day care, but it was the last thing Carmigniani thought possible when she and her daughter became homeless last summer.

Kathy Ross, director of Child & Family Resources in Morris County, saw the possibility and made it happen. Her vision: a blended program that provides top-notch care for children of professionals, the homeless and low-income families.

As the director of the previous child-care center located in the United Methodist Church on the Green, she watched the low-income family program close in the late 1980s because church leaders feared state funding could no longer sustain a quality program.

With startup funding from companies including AT&T, Exxon and Warner-Lambert, Children on the Green opened in 1994. It remains the only center in the state to guarantee slots — nine now — for homeless children. The children are referred from the Homeless Solutions shelter in Morris County, the Interfaith Council and the Jersey Battered Women's Shelter.

"The reality is, children are children first," Ross says. "Homelessness is an economic situation that happens at a particular point in time. None of us knows when this could happen to us."

As a married, pregnant college student at Fairleigh Dickinson University, Shannon Kirby didn't see it coming. When she and her husband divorced, she was able to stay in school for a short while. But after her son was born, it became financially impossible, so she quit and took a job as a restaurant manager. She and her ex shared the care of their son, Dayshawn Bradshaw.

When that didn't work anymore, Kirby and Dayshawn ended up at the Interfaith Council shelter.

That was two years ago. Kirby, 31, received welfare while she completed job training and Dayshawn went to Children on the Green. He's 2½, and is still there even though his mother now works as a receptionist for a financial adviser and they have their own apartment in Victory Gardens.

Rochelle Kelman, the center's director and a prolific grant writer, works hard to keep funding flowing in — from foundations, churches and organizations like the United Way — so children like Dayshawn can stay after they are no longer homeless.

Within this jewel of a place you find, as Ross says, "all the great ingredients to do it right": Benefits and the best pay available (\$7.50 to \$10 an hour); well-educated teachers and assistants who regularly attend National Association for the Education of Young Children training sessions; a diverse group of children, and low staff turnover.

Last summer, when a temporary living arrangement with a friend ended, Carmigniani had no car and nowhere to live close to her job as a bank teller. "I ran out of options," she says. Out of shelter and, soon after, out of a job, she and Antoinette went to Homeless Solutions.

"I needed day care to get a job, but I couldn't get a job without day care," she recalls. Children on the Green provided one so she could get the other.

The mother of all child-care studies, by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, has found only 9 percent of child care programs to be excellent, and 30 percent to be good.

When they needed it most and expected it least, Carmigniani and her daughter found their way to one of the best.

Dory Devlin writes about the workplace. E-mail her at [ddevlin@starledger.com](mailto:ddevlin@starledger.com) or write Business/Edge, The Star-Ledger, 1 Star-Ledger Plaza, Newark, 07102.