

# **Raising a Family of Volunteers:**

An Interview with Kelly Frydman

**Q: How did you first get involved with Family Promise of Southeast Florida?**

A: I got involved through B'nai Torah Congregation, but it was so long ago. I know I for sure started at B'nai Torah in the hallways and some of the classrooms where they set up the air mattresses. I was like oh, this is something someone of any age could do. I think Jad was maybe two and Rylan was in a stroller. Jad didn't really talk much, and I was like hey, you can plug this cord in and blow up a mattress, and you can put a napkin down on a table with a fork and a knife and set a table. We started that way. I think there were a handful of different churches and temples and different hosts at the time, and B'nai Torah had a "mommy and me" preschool thing, so I learned about Family Promise through there. And I was like, this is something my kids could start doing, because everyone asks, "what can your kids do?"

We started when the kids were really really young, and then it just progressed. At first it was like oh, this is something a little kid could do, and I'd just keep talking them about what it means. Like, "You go home to your bed and it's actually in your house, but these are beds that are temporarily set up. And in the morning, before somebody goes into the classroom, these beds are going to be tucked away, and that's not where they're going to always be sleeping." Because that's where, at first, they had the families we were hosting on air mattresses. So we started with that, and I wanted to make sure I could do something where my kids, who were young, could understand something as simple as that.

**Q: So you got involved through B'nai Torah Congregation. Was it specifically due to your faith that you got involved?**

A: I'm spiritual, and I'm kind, and I respect all religion. So I wouldn't necessarily say I did this through my faith. I moved from Arizona, where I was in social work. My whole career, if we want to call it that, my whole mission every day was to connect families that were in the system to whatever kind of services they needed. So, psychology, psychiatry, if they the kids were in juvie then child protective services, those kinds of things. So when I moved here I was looking for things like that. It wasn't so much homelessness when I was in Arizona, it was everything. Sometimes it was pulling kids out of their dangerous environments, like gangs and all sorts of situations.

I think I was always going to do something and I wanted my kids to be raised to know that even if they had one meal a day, how lucky they are to have all of the love they have and a roof over their heads. I don't know if it was faith or if it was really just the person I am. I would've found something hands-on for my kids to be raised to know that they're really lucky to have their education and the things they have.

**Q: So it's pretty clear that you and your kids have worked with a number of community-based organizations. What do you feel makes Family Promise different than the other places you've worked with?**

A: I think that so much of what makes Family Promise different is that there are a lot of beautiful people. I have heard consistently for so long, "I want to help, I want to help," but they don't know where to and whatnot, and I think there's a lot more untapped people, and a lot of times, at least in my friendship group, saying "I want my kids to be involved but I don't know where or how." So when I found Family Promise I was like oh, this is a "how," this is hands-on, and sometimes you have to be at a certain age to help [at other organizations] but this felt like it didn't age-discriminate, at least if it's playing with another kid. You're not looking at "oh, I donated my time," you know, we never counted community service hours, it was never something like that. But I felt like my kids could still come back to their "home" and have an understanding that [B'nai Torah Congregation] was not these kids' "home."

And I think additionally with Family Promise, I loved the fact that—and this is definitely because of my experiences in Arizona—I met so many families that really appreciated help and really really needed help. And I've met families that took advantage of help, unfortunately. I was young! I was fresh out of college. I liked the fact that there was always a goal with Family Promise. It was short-term, and it had a system, and there wasn't anybody sitting around taking advantage of anything. It was "this happened, and now we're going to help you, and you're going to help yourself get back to where you were." And the plan is in place. And I was like, to me, that's such a positive, I wish it could be on the biggest scale. But there's responsibility involved, and I think that that's empowering to anybody, to not feel hopeless or like you're not earning it.

**Q: So you mentioned that you have this specific memory of teaching Jad, "this is how you can help this person, you can plug this in, set this table up." Aside from that, do you have any other specific memories or stories of working with families from Family Promise that made a difference to you? Or were memorable?**

A: I think having my kids just be kids. Once we shifted from the classrooms and air mattresses and were able to do a lot more playing and interacting, as time went on Rylan was involved, and then eventually Astera was involved as things shifted. And trust me, that girl will come up with solutions to save the world!

But the kids would just go and they understood that a kid from Family Promise would get picked up from the original center and then get dropped off last so that they weren't the kids that were made fun of or treated differently. And those were lessons that I will always tell anyone, not just my kids. People are people, everybody's circumstances are different, and not one is greater than the other. There's a lesson in everything. But I think my kids just had such normalcy that they brought with them. Like, my kids had never played Monopoly, so we brought the game of Monopoly at one of the houses. So they sat there for hours and one of the kids that was in the

program taught them how to play Monopoly, not me. We played a lot of cards, we played Twister, we had dance-offs! Astera was doing the splits, literally like, popping and locking. They were swinging on swings, shooting hoops, just being kids! Which is actually what they all deserved.

There absolutely was no distinction between what child came with me, and what child was literally sleeping in one of the rooms there [at B'nai Torah Congregation]. Sometimes I said to my kids, "some of these kids might want to talk about something kid-oriented, or they might not want to talk, or their parents might be tired and just want to go to their room," and that was okay too. And at that point we were setting tables, and having a meal together, and just warming things up. So it wasn't so much for us that we were serving the meals, it was more, for us, like "we're going to break bread together, and then we're going to play." And we just played! What kid doesn't want to do that? It's attention—my kids got attention, the kids in the program got attention, and we always had a good time and a good night, and I think it's impactful because it shows that the distinction is not in your circumstances, the distinction is that it's that there isn't one! They're just people living their lives. Just doing the best you can.

**Q: I love hearing you talk about this. I know that when we were on the phone recently, you mentioned that you saw a difference in your kids as they grew up with this mentality of "there is no distinction." I was wondering if you could speak a little bit more to that. How did volunteering as a family, growing up and doing this regularly, impact your kids? In what ways individually would you say they were impacted?**

A: I would say that for Jad specifically, I think he was a "sensory kid" before that was even really a term. I had to learn a lot just talking to so many different professionals... we didn't need like an official diagnosis, but there were definitely things where my kid would like to touch something rough, almost like sandpaper, where I'd be like whoa, I wouldn't like the feeling of that. And I think with Jad, when he would go to Family Promise and be around all different types of kids, he was in an environment where nobody would see him as, I don't want to say "different," but he worked himself into the human he is. And I feel like with Family Promise, he always felt like he could just be himself, and he did make a come-up.

He wrote his college essay, which I need to find, not about Family Promise, but there was a blurb in there about how he did volunteer, but it was more that the experience was helpful to him vs. him being helpful to the cause. So that's Jad, which I'm like, it's an interesting perspective. I never really talked to him about it, it was always like "it's time! We're going to go volunteer at Family Promise!" And everyone was always up for it.

Rylan loves to cook, so when it was time to bring any kind of meal or do anything food-oriented, he was in the kitchen. He liked to go to the grocery store and shop and take the time. And then Astera just liked to do anything that needed organization and dedication. She would line up the containers and everything. But she liked playing, she liked playing at the house. She liked to just go and play with the kids, like her dance-offs and stuff. They all just had so much fun.

As a kid nowadays, nobody looks you in the eyes enough. Nobody really has a lot of empathy or sympathy. A lot of these kids are really into their own world... their heads are buried into their phones. You don't know what they're doing, or watching, or trying to be. Cool, or fit in. And I was not raising kids like that. I was raising kids that were going to be confident in who they are, and if that means you walk your path alone, then that's your best path. And if you wind up on that path, your good people will find you, and I think that's always been my message. So for my kids, [Family Promise] just made complete sense to them. These people have their circumstances, we have our circumstance, everyone has circumstances.

**Q: That's funny, because my next question was going to be: Do you think that doing this work has shaped not only your values, but your kids' values too? I mean, it sounds like a yes!**

A: I think they could use more shaping. I do. I think that it's a constant reminder... I have to say, there's an expression, it's a Jewish expression, and I think somebody used it in my family, but it's "*l'dor v'dor*," and it just means you pass on "from generation to generation." It's actually a beautiful expression. But I think that's important to me, that I am one of these people. I'm always thinking of others, I really am. Sometimes I will give all of myself, and then be like oh yeah, what about me? I've given all of me. But I do that mostly now for my kids, to my kids and my husband. But I do remind my kids about giving ten percent, or a certain percentage of that time with your job or business or whatever, putting it into an x, y, or z fund.

Rylan said to me once, "Why don't we all plant a garden in our backyard and get our neighbors to all do it so that when it's time for us to volunteer at Family Promise, we can go around our neighborhood and we can collect all the food from everybody's house that they grew in their backyard?" He's coming up with this whole community for the community coming from your own yard instead of the grocery store! I was like, that might be a tough one in this day and age and because of where we live, but why not? Our next-door neighbors have a banana tree and an overgrowth of bananas, we could certainly make some banana bread.

So, I thought that was so cute, and then I think that Jad was like, if I become a builder and a developer, why not try to build some housing that is donated housing for those that have the need? And Rylan was like, "I'll be the architect for it!" So as they're going down their career paths, they always have that in their mind. There's always a part of it where they're not living under a bridge. Jad is the kind of guy that would figure out how to do it, and Astera is the girl that will ask anybody to get to the goal, and Rylan is like, "I'll design it!" I'm like, Jad will build it, Rylan will design it, and Astera will make it happen.

Right now we have all of these boxes lined up in our house for hurricane relief, and her school is filling up semi-trucks. Sometimes I think that people need to really for some reason, for their own fulfillment maybe, see [their work in action]. Like if you donate money, you want to see it. You know how we used to get calls and like, how much of this money will go to their cause? Like oh 10%, while the other 90% is not. I think sometimes people like to see the tangible, and

her school is filling up semi-trucks that are parked at her school. And they're filling them, and when they're full, they're going up to North Carolina to bring the hurricane relief. My kids love that kind of tangible stuff. Tangible is a big deal.

[Jad and Rylan's school] does a good job of teaching the kids about community service and giving back. And whenever we've said we're doing a collection for Family Promise, we have these needs for essential things, their school has done a good job, especially when my kids were smaller, of getting the kids and telling them "Don't forget the rolls of paper towel and other things for Jad and Rylan!" They always did collections like that through their school.

I want to ask Jad and his fraternity, because I know that frats do a lot of things, I know they do, it's part of being in a fraternity. I'm going to ask him now that he's a sophomore—I know that they definitely do things for causes. It would be great hit up the frats and the sororities at all these universities [in South Florida], actually. They have to do things, and maybe if they just know, here's *exactly* what we're trying to do. I think that's a lot of times a challenge—instead of "how about working with Family Promise?" we can instead say, "we're trying to raise ten thousand rolls of paper towel!" or whatever it is. Something very specific. But I think that's helpful.

**Q: That's a great idea! That's awesome. So I did have one last question—you guys as a family have been involved for fifteen years, so what does that look like in the future?**

A: We don't do enough in my family. We do what we do, but we could always do more. And it's busy. I'm trying to raise really great kids, and I hope this like, steps them into doing things in their own capacity through life. I know that Astera will continue volunteering with Family Promise. But again, we could always do more.

I think if things are broken down—like I always feel like if people see a very small picture and they feel like they took a hand in that small picture, that each one of those small pictures can become the big picture. But if we're just like "oh, I work with Family Promise and we're taking donations," [people] don't see enough... I want my kids to break it down.