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Homeless single moms find refuge in this Oakland house

Urban University offers housing, job training to moms in need



OAKLAND, CA - JULY 30: Urban University founder and Executive Director Tracey Weaver, left, talks with Diane Cousins in a house that Cousins shares with other women in the program in Oakland, Calif., on Monday, July 29, 2019. The nonprofit provides housing and job training for single mothers on public assistance. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group)

By **MARISA KENDALL** | mkendall@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group

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OAKLAND — Diane Cousins never imagined she'd wind up homeless.

The 41-year-old Jamaica native had worked as a consultant for Kaiser Permanente for 11 years, before resigning to open her own business selling coconut macaroons and other homemade baked goods. She and her two sons had a stable home in El Sobrante with her youngest son's father.

But when her business failed and her relationship with her son's father fell apart last year, forcing her to move out, she found herself with no home and no income. Cousins bounced from couch to couch, sometimes staying in hotels and Airbnbs. At some point during that year, she realized she had become the dreaded h-word—homeless.

“That was a hard pill to swallow,” she said. “I wasn’t expecting that. But that’s what it was. So once I came to terms with that, it was like, ‘OK, well how do you get out of this situation?’”

The answer was an unassuming single-family home in Oakland, which for the past few years has served as a little-known refuge for homeless single mothers. The house, which Cousins moved into in June, is managed by Urban University, a nonprofit that has provided job training and coaching to single mothers for 20 years.

Urban University hires the moms at its second-hand clothing, furniture and housewares store on Grand Avenue near Lake Merritt, where they earn minimum wage and learn on-the-job skills. Five years ago, the nonprofit opened the Oakland house to shelter some of the women it employs.

Now it’s hoping to expand, thanks to a grant from the city expected to come through this fall.

The idea is to be a one-stop shop for women struggling to overcome the poverty that at times can seem overpowering. Without a home, these women can’t hold down a job. But without a job, they won’t be able to keep their housing, said founder Tracey Weaver.

“Either you sit and look at stuff happening and don’t do anything about it, or you get in there and you start making your way and making things happen,” Weaver said. “And that’s the kind of hustle that we’ve got going on right now.”



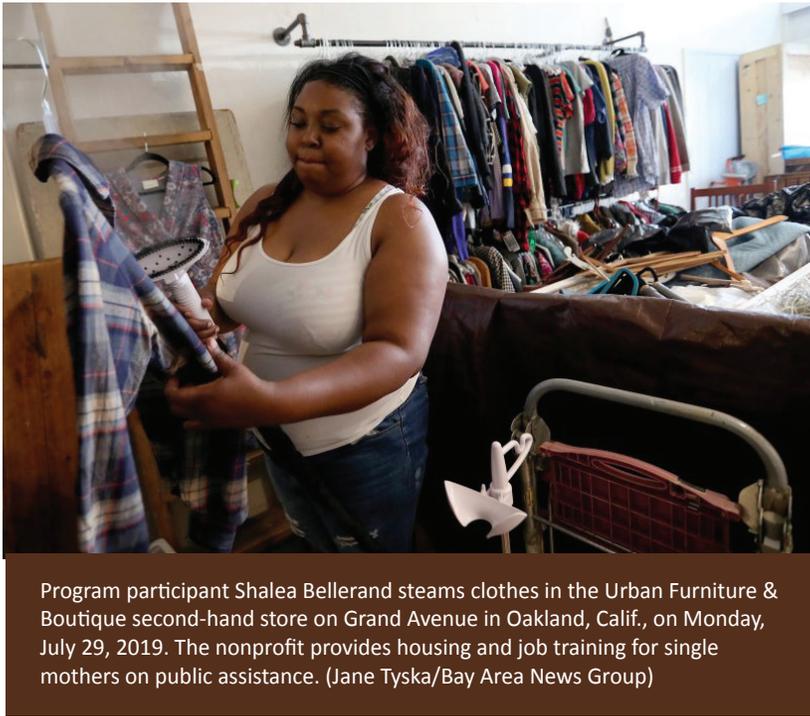
Elsa Cardona, social enterprise manager for Urban University, takes a food break outside the Urban Furniture & Boutique second-hand store on Grand Avenue in Oakland, Calif., on Monday, July 29, 2019. The nonprofit provides housing and job training for single mothers on public assistance. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group)



Urban University founder and Executive Director Tracey Weaver, left, works with program participant Shalea Bellerand, right, in the Urban Furniture & Boutique second-hand store on Grand Avenue in Oakland, Calif., on Monday, July 29, 2019. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group)

That hustle attracted the attention of Oakland City Councilwoman Nikki Fortunato Bas, who recently recommended Urban University for a city grant. The money, which will be in the range of \$50,000, has been approved and should be distributed this fall.

“Councilmember Bas is a proud supporter of Urban University’s work to provide job training and transitional housing for single mothers exiting poverty,” Bas’ office wrote in an emailed statement while the councilwoman was out of town. “She believes we need programs like this now more than ever to address Oakland’s growing crises of homelessness and income inequality.”



Program participant Shalea Bellerand steams clothes in the Urban Furniture & Boutique second-hand store on Grand Avenue in Oakland, Calif., on Monday, July 29, 2019. The nonprofit provides housing and job training for single mothers on public assistance. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group)

As the price to rent or buy a home in Oakland has soared in recent years, so has the city's homeless population. Volunteers recorded 4,071 people living without homes in January — up 47 percent from 2017, according to the city's biennial point-in-time count.

Urban University is trying to combat that poverty by getting people back to work, providing job training and coaching to 1,600 participants over the past two decades. Ten years ago, it opened its second-hand store on Grand, selling donated second-hand clothing, shoes, accessories and more.

In 2016 it downsized into a smaller space next door. Now it's an eye-catching green storefront, marked by a large "Urban" sign and racks of clothing displayed on the sidewalk out front. The store recently

underwent a small 10-day renovation — donations paid the \$900 bill — and has a grand re-opening planned for Thursday evening.

The store brings in between \$60,000 and \$70,000 a year in revenue, which, after expenses, goes toward the mothers' salaries and to funding the other services the nonprofit provides, Weaver said. Urban University also receives donations and grants, and saves money on rent through a gift from its landlord — the same landlord who owns the storefront allows the nonprofit to use the residential house rent-free.

That three-bedroom home (which also has a dining room converted into a bedroom) now houses two moms and their three children, all of whom can stay for up to two years. Mothers generally pay of one-third of their income in rent, plus utilities.

The small program represents a drop in the bucket that is Oakland's homelessness crisis. Weaver generally gets about three calls a week from mothers hoping to get in — far more than she can accept.

When Urban University receives its expected city grant this fall, Weaver hopes to bring another single mother to live in the house, and four more single moms to work in the store — doubling the number of women in the program.

Weaver also plans to hire a housing and workforce development coach, who will guide the women through the process of becoming employed and housed. That will add one more to the tiny nonprofit's permanent staff of three — not including the rotating cast of single mothers.



Urban University founder and Executive Director Tracey Weaver, left, works with program participant Shalea Bellerand, right, in the Urban Furniture & Boutique second-hand store on Grand Avenue in Oakland, Calif., on Monday, July 29, 2019. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group)



Urban University program participant Diane Cousins puts dishes away in a house she shares with other women in the program in Oakland, Calif., on Monday, July 29, 2019. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group)

For Cousins, the house has made a huge difference. She had sent her sons to live with other family members during the year she was homeless, and now they're all united again.

"The stability — that's so important to me," Cousins said. "That they know where they're sleeping and where their home is. And that we're all together."

To donate to, shop at or learn more about Urban University, visit the second-hand store at 3237 Grand Ave. in Oakland, call 510-835-3165 or visit www.urbanuniv.org.

Single moms who want to apply to the program can visit www.urbanuniv.org/programs/moms-at-work.



OAKLAND, CA - JULY 30: Urban University founder and Executive Director Tracey Weaver, center, and program participant Diane Cousins, left, talk with a friend as they leave the Urban Furniture & Boutique second-hand store on Grand Avenue in Oakland, Calif., on Monday, July 29, 2019. The nonprofit provides housing and job training for single mothers on public assistance. (Jane Tyska/Bay Area News Group)



Marisa Kendall Marisa Kendall covers housing for the Bay Area News Group, focusing on the impact local companies have on housing availability in the region. She's also written about technology startups and venture capital for BANG, and covered courts for The Recorder in San Francisco. She started her career as a crime reporter for The News-Press in Southwest Florida.

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