

COMMUNITY



BILL FRASER / PHOTOJOURNALIST

Jackson Galant (8 months) plays with his mother, Antoinette, on a swing in the new playground outside the Bucks Homeless Shelter in Bristol Township. "We've been here since December, right before Christmas," said Antoinette. "It's pretty nice here."

Safety net

**Bucks County
Emergency Homeless
Shelter's new
playground brings
a level of stability
to transitioning
families.**

By DEBRA WALLACE
CORRESPONDENT

Tom DiVergigelis and Jamie McFarland recently beamed with pride while watching their two young children on the new red swing at the Bucks County Emergency Homeless Shelter.

The brightly colored swing, which supports two or three children at a time, is on the shelter's new playground, and was selected along with the other pieces of equipment because they can accommodate multiple users across a variety of age groups, something important for the shelter residents.

Previously, on the same spot, rested old and rusting equipment that was deemed unsafe. The planning for the new playground began last August, and it opened March 30.

The money and labor for the new playground involved a cross section of the community, including several local banks, as well as students from Conwell-Egan Catholic High School. A majority of the money came from: Customers Bank, Meridian Bank, BB&T, M&T Bank, Anna Marie and Bill Clark, Wehrung's Lumber & Home Center, and Eric Blum from 1-800-GOT-JUNK.

Ellen Vinson, director of volunteer services, began scheduling groups of volunteers in November 2016 for various segments of the demolition and installation processes.



See **PLAYGROUND**, Page B2



An unidentified boy plays on a swing in the new playground outside the Bucks Homeless Shelter.

Brothers' babies born 18 hours apart at Abington Hospital



PHOTO BY WILLIAM THOMAS CAIN

Michael Klenk (left), 31, his wife, Candice, 29, of Chalfont, along with Michael's brother Matthew Klenk, 34, and his wife, Jennifer, 33, of Towamencin, share a moment with their new babies at Abington Hospital-Jefferson Health. The children were born 18 hours apart Tuesday and Wednesday.

By FRED A. SAVANA
STAFF WRITER

Call it fate, or serendipity or just a rare coincidence, but when two brothers and their wives have babies a mere 18 hours apart at the same hospital where the fathers were also born, it's pretty cool.

And in case those details aren't enough to surprise you, add this to the list: The brothers, Matthew and Michael Klenk and Matthew's wife, Jennifer, all teach in the North Penn School District's music program. Michael's wife, Candice, 29, is a speech therapist with the Montgomery County Intermediate Unit.

As the couples stood exhausted but beaming Thursday morning at Abington Hospital-Jefferson Health, they explained how they learned about each others' pregnancies and how, Matthew, 34, and Jennifer, 33, were shocked to discover they were having twins.

"Our plan was to surprise my mom with a grandmother's birthstone necklace for her birthday, and it would have an extra space," explained Matthew. Just one extra opening because at that point he and his wife didn't know they would be having two sons.

Michael and Candice were at the birthday celebration too, and planning to make their own announcement. Neither of the couples knew of the others' exciting news.

"All of a sudden, Michael and Candice started laughing hysterically," Jennifer recalled. "Then, they said they were having a baby, too."

Without planning, they went to the same doctor during their pregnancies, often bumping into each other in the waiting room. They learned of their babies' genders on the same day, too.

"It's all been kinda crazy," said Matthew. "Yep, pretty awesome," added Michael.

See **BABIES**, Page B3

Playground

Continued from Page B1

As a result of the generosity of the local community, Tommy, 2, and his sister, Isabella, 9 months, who are among the 20 children who live at the homeless shelter, are now happily running and playing outside on the new equipment. “The first time I put my son down on the swing he was so relaxed that he fell asleep after a few minutes,” said Tom DiVergigelis. “He loves to swing.”

Although both parents are deaf, shelter staff are able to translate for them. When asked what she thought of the new playground, Jamie responded with the ASL sign for “smile.”

The DiVergigelis/McFarland family moved to the Bristol Township homeless shelter six months ago; Tom lives in the men’s dorm and Jamie and their two children in the women’s dorm.

Like many of the 39 adult residents at the shelter, they are waiting for final paperwork in order to get a local apartment or house.

A lot of apartments require an up-to-date credit history and proof of employment. Divergigelis, who is unemployed, is also looking for a job as a contractor or auto body worker. “I will take anything,” he said, “to help take care of my family.”

Murielle Kelly, the director of housing services for Family Service Association of Bucks County, the agency that operates the shelter, said before the new playground opened, the children had no outdoor recreation and were frequently “stuck inside” the shelter.

While the playground, which has the swing, a climbing apparatus and musical toy, is definitely providing a great deal of fun for all of the children at the shelter, Kelly said it is doing so much more. “It is helping the younger children develop the milestones needed for development.”

“Our goal is to get them into a stable home in the next 60 days,” Kelly said. “But in the meantime, this is giving them a sense of being children; having fun, playing and relaxing in the face of crisis.”

She said the donations of money and labor speak loudly

about the community. “It says that the community cares, stepped forward, and made this possible,” Kelly said. “If a child can come in scared and crying because they don’t know what’s going to happen, and in a few days come out here and have fun, it tells them we are getting to the next step — we are starting to give them a home life.”

The Bucks County Emergency Homeless Shelter is a temporary residence for individuals and families who have lost safe and stable housing. The shelter operates 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. It serves as a temporary home to as many as 70 people at any given time. Typically, about one-third of the residents are children.

Contributions from donors and the major effort from hundreds of volunteers each year are the driving force behind the shelter. On-site services include case management; job search and preparation; budget planning; health evaluations, screenings and referrals; outpatient counseling; and transportation to doctors’ appointments, job interviews and summer camp for children.

Luz Rivera, resident life associate supervisor for the shelter, says that parents who live at the shelter enjoy seeing the children at play. “This brand new playground is so much easier for the children now. They love it. They are here every day.” Some of the older children can ride their bicycles around the parameter while their parents watch nearby.

An anonymous shelter resident, who lives there with her 11-year-old daughter and 12-year-old son, says both children enjoy running around the playground, and also tenderly watch the toddlers who are there. “The old one was shut down for a few months during the transition,” their mom said, “and it was really missed — this new playground is beautiful!”

Her daughter said she likes the equipment because it is strong and won’t break easily. “I like that there is something for the little kids and the big kids,” the fifth-grader said. Her brother, a sixth-grader, added: “I like to run around and play tag. I also like to climb, and spend time with the other kids. This is great!”

The Wish List

The Bucks County Emergency Homeless Shelter needs extra play items and outdoor toys for the new playground area, including plastic sandboxes, kid-friendly removable toys, and plastic picnic tables and benches. All items must be new. The shelter also accepts monetary donations and in-kind donations of nonperishable food, first aid/ personal care items and cleaning supplies.

Here is a current wish list:

www.fsabc.org/
wish-list-shelter.

Members of the community with questions about how to help the shelter or who have new items to donate, may call: Murielle Kelly, Director of Housing Services, at 215-949-1727, ext. 110, or email Murielle at: mkelly@fsabc.org

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