

Building a Foundation



Girls gather for a meal in 1924 at the The Home for Friendless Children of the Eastern Shore of Maryland.

Organization recognizes roots as Eastern Shore orphanage

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EASTON — There's a brick building that sits behind Trinity Cathedral on Goldsborough Street in Easton. It's used as an apartment building now, but until 1958, it had a much different use — serving as an orphanage called The Home for Friendless Children of the Eastern Shore of Maryland.

Opened in 1871, the home was the brainchild of Anna M.L. Earle, Elias Dawson and Bishop Henry Champlain, the leader of the newly formed Diocese of Easton, which sponsored the home. According to a history compiled by Elouise Howard Davis for the Children's Home Foundation, a scholarship-giving group founded after the closing of the home, the first house was opened on Glebe Road in Easton with two children with money raised, donated and granted by Talbot County and the state of Maryland. By the end of the year, the home housed 14 children, and in 1874, a new home was built on North Street

to accommodate more residents.

Neavitt resident Norma Higgins lived in the new house from 1953 to 1958, with about 24 other girls ages 5 and up.

"It was one of the best places, I think, that you could live with the circumstances that you had in your life," Higgins said.

Higgins, 76, moved to the children's home when she was 13 and stayed for her teenage years, moving out when she got married at 18. Though she can't speak for what it was like to live there during its early years, she said near the end of its tenure, it was a great place to grow up.

During her time in the house, Higgins said, a typical day involved waking up, doing chores and heading off to school, much like any other teenager. She had a curfew, attended school dances and there were sponsors to make sure the girls still had gifts on their birthdays and for Christmas.

"I really enjoyed everything about living there ... We used to call ourselves the poor little rich girls," Higgins said. "It was just really a nice, nice place to live when you didn't have a mother and a father."

There also were three house mothers and a superintendent who, Higgins said, were less administrators and more like family.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTOS

Girls living at the house gather for a photo in 1917. This was the second location of the children's home, the first having been deemed too small not long after its opening.

"They were like mothers to us; they cared about us and they loved us," Higgins said. "If we had any problems, we would sit and talk to them, and they would help us in any way that they could."

What she never saw, Higgins said, was any kind of stigma among her classmates and friends because she lived in the children's home.

"I never minded living there at all, and I don't feel ashamed even now to tell anyone," Higgins said. "I have nothing to be ashamed of."

According to Howard Davis' report, compiled with the help of the book "Unto the Least of These" by Polly Ross, a history of the children's home, the home was closed in 1958 for many reasons, including the increasing popularity of foster homes, growing government regulations and a shift in attitudes about social responsibility.

A few months later, in 1959, with the funds from the sale of the home and continued support from the Episcopal Diocese of Easton, the Children's Home Foundation of the Eastern Shore of Maryland was created. Higgins and another former resident of the children's home recently connected with members of the foundation board, a first for both sides.

"It was really touching for us to hear the stories of these women," said Martha Austin from the foundation. "We're ever mindful of where our roots are."

The Children's Home Foundation each year grants scholarships and camperships to students specifically on the East-

ern Shore. The scholarships are for students who are pursuing vocational or job training, and the camperships are for children who are otherwise unable to afford summer camp. According to a report, the foundation gave out \$170,375 in scholarships to 108 students in 2013-14 and \$29,924 in camp funding. Austin said the scholarship number has gone up this past year, with the foundation giving money to 119 students.

The also provides emergency aid to young people in the area when disaster or hardship occurs and there is no other aid available.

Despite living under the umbrella of the Episcopal Diocese of Easton, Austin said the foundation functions independently and maintains its own records and finances. The foundation depends solely on donations and the remaining endowment from the sale of the orphanage. November is the group's fund-raising month.

"We really do depend on donations," Austin said. "We don't have galas or dinners or golf tournaments. It's very quiet."



Beds sit ready for use by children housed at The Home for Friendless Children of the Eastern Shore of Maryland in 1924.

For More Information

To learn more about the Children's Home Foundation, or to make a donation, call the Episcopal Diocese of Easton at 410-822-1919 or visit www.dioceseofeaston.org.