



Shelley Crump gets to know children at Amani House, the new shelter of Southwest Women Working Together.

Photo for the Tribune by Lisa Genesen

# She's seen it all

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By **Marya Smith**  
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

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**S**helley Crump began her freshman year at the University of Iowa determined to become a social worker. At age 18 she had already experienced many of life's tough challenges: domestic violence, an alcoholic parent, teen pregnancy, a brush with inner-city gangs. She thought that her mission was to help others overcome difficult times as she had been helped.

"I think anyone who has been through as many issues as someone like myself chooses the helping fields," said Crump, 40. "I had always envisioned myself working one on one with clients, being there for them." Yet when she finished her first undergraduate practicums, she realized she was heading in the wrong direction.

"I quickly found I was not the best person to do direct service work, and I was surprised," said Crump. "One of the first groups I worked with were substance abusers. To me it's simple: You have to go through treatment. But it's hard, especially if you're a minority person, say a single woman with children, because treatment can be 14 days to six months, and the woman has to figure out how to maintain her house or apartment, how to find child care. A lot of women aren't willing to make those steps, even if you are there helping them figure out how to do that."

"So I found that even if you are there, your clients are not always ready. It's when they're not ready that frustrates me. I found myself thinking, 'Here we are giving you everything you're saying that you want,'" Crump recalled.

"I also found that I bond very closely with certain types of clients. For instance, I worked with an elderly population and found I easily develop an affinity with them. I grew up with five generations alive on one side and six generations on the other side, so trying to please the elderly and make their living more comfortable is very important to me.

"So I discovered that it is difficult for me to set boundaries for certain groups, like the elderly. Yet I knew a good social worker has to set very clear boundaries or you'll get burned out very quickly."

Crump's college field work made her stop and reassess her career direction. "When I discovered it is hard for me to implement one-on-one services, I struggled with this realization, talked to professors and close friends," Crump recalled. "I was fortunate because the college I was attending offered a degree in social work administration. Even though I had never envisioned being an administrator, I found I could be creative and develop programs and so utilize my skills to help people.

"After my initial struggle, I had a feeling of relief, of being in touch with my soul, with my life work. This sense of peace made me more focused on my vision. I felt no matter what obstacles I faced, I could overcome them because I was going in the right direction. It's important to have a whole bunch of options for people, and I

can create those as an administrator."

Crump has had ample opportunity to develop options for people in need. After earning a master's degree in social work administration, she worked as an administrator for the Minneapolis Urban League and then for the National Urban League and the New Harlem YWCA in New York. She is now executive director of Southwest Women Working Together, a Chicago not-for-profit organization.

Before coming to Chicago earlier this year, Crump was director of case management at Little Rock's Ryan White Center, a non-profit AIDS treatment and prevention agency. The center's caseload increased from 67 to 300 within a year after Crump arrived.

"The women and minorities were coming in and staying because when they saw a woman and a minority at the desk, they felt more comfortable coming into the system," she said.

Crump, however, was once again working one-on-one with clients. "All the old feelings I discovered back in college were stirred up. People with AIDS are like the elderly to me, but with even greater needs because you're looking at people your own age or younger, even babies, who are dying."

After three years in Little Rock, Crump thought it was important to move on.

"I realized I needed some space. If you are not taking care of yourself, you have nothing left to give. This is a hard lesson to learn."

Crump's Chicago position is a good professional match, she said.

"There isn't an issue that Southwest Women Working Together is working on that I haven't experienced firsthand. I've been exposed to domestic violence, to employment programs, to housing issues, to community organizing, and this organization works with all of that," she said.

"Our clients are women and children, primarily victims of domestic violence, and our whole mission is to move them to self-sufficiency."

In the last 20 years, Southwest Women Working Together has helped more than 85,000 women in the surrounding community move from poverty and homelessness to economic stability.

Crump said one of her primary roles as executive director is to motivate.

"When we opened a 42-bed shelter, Amani House, in the Pullman neighborhood in August, I was able to get the housing program staff to devote their entire summer, 60 days straight, to preparations," she said. "And then they had to put their professional hats back on when the clients walked in needing their services."

"I was there with them sometimes during those 14 to 16 hour days to show

support, but mainly I kept the vision of what the shelter means in the forefront of their minds, and that helped them to find the stamina to do it.

"It's the same with the board of directors: My job is to help them crystallize their goals. I have a very professional board — of lawyers, business owners, professors — and I show them that the staff and I will be with them every step of the way. I help give them courage."

Crump learned from observing others. "When I worked for the National Urban League, I was exposed to the workings of the Hill," she said. "I saw Patricia Harris, the first black woman to head a major government organization, operate. When she was answering the congressmen and a question came up that she didn't know the answer to, she would turn around to her staff and they would come and answer. That taught me a valuable lesson: You don't have to know everything; you just have to have access to people who know."

Crump attributed her administrative style to her mentors.

"I've never been one to micromanage, or overmanage, people," she said. "I am able to trust the young people on my staff to do difficult assignments because people let me do that as I was growing."

"The beauty of being an administrator is that I have the power to give the staff freedom to exercise their skills to the fullest. People are in the helping fields because they have experienced pain, heartache or struggle on some level. They choose the field because they have a vision, and they just need encouragement (from the administrator) to keep that sense of vision."

Fundraising is another fundamental task of an administrator, Crump said.

"Funders want to know what drives you. What drives you is passion for an issue, and the way you develop passion for an issue is from personal experience, either your own or someone you are close to.

"I also bring community and business leaders in to see how we operate. Once people see what we are doing, they understand the need for our programs."

"I am not interested in being a revolving door or a Band-Aid," Crump said. "When a woman leaves one of our programs, I want to be sure she doesn't need to come back for help on the same issue. I'm very interested in services or options that enable a woman or child to reach economic self-sufficiency or attain the ego strength needed for the tough decisions in her life."

Crump knows firsthand how important outside help can be in moving from difficult times to self-sufficiency.

As a youngster growing up on Long

Island, Crump's world was secure. The public school system identified her potential, and she was placed in advanced classes in an experimental school.

"I was raised as a bright, special child in a supportive family," Crump said. "I adored my father, but I knew something was wrong. I knew he was abusing my mother. When he gave her a black eye, she would say, 'I got it from the doorknob. Although she tried to hide it from us, as the oldest child [of five] I knew.'"

When Crump was 12, her mother left her abusive marriage and moved to Chicago.

"On Long Island I had lived in a (racially) mixed neighborhood but had never been exposed to gang violence. Not knowing the city, my mother moved into a neighborhood where the Black Stone Rangerettes were recruiting heavily. Every time my sister and I stepped out the door, we were met by a group of girls and they beat us up."

When her mother remarried a year later, Crump chose to return to New York to live with her father.

"At that time he had not made the adjustment to losing his family and he was a chronic alcoholic, so there was no guidance at home."

"I went to a different high school and lived in a different town every single year of my high school years."

"The support and stability in my life were provided by Outward Bound, a program that helped at-risk youth to prepare for college," Crump said.

"For four years she attended every Saturday meeting during the school year as well as the program's summer camp on a college campus in Massachusetts."

"I can't tell you how important it was to me to see a successful black couple running a program. I could call them no matter what kind of problem I was having, and they would address it."

Crump became pregnant her senior year of high school and gave birth to a baby girl a week before she received her diploma.

"My grandmother said, 'Well, I guess that means you won't be going to college.'" Crump's high school counselor agreed.

"But I had an Outward Bound counselor who said, 'Despite the fact that you've had a child, you're college material and you're going.'"

"I was accepted by five colleges and chose the one that gave me the most money," said Crump. "My aunt cared for my daughter her first 24 months so I could have a normal college life the first two years. At the point when I could take care of her, my daughter was brought to Iowa and went to school right with me."

Although Crump's shift in career direction came as a profound surprise during her college years, she believes this change has allowed her to help others in ways she never dreamed of as a student.

"Once I started in this new direction, I blossomed," said Crump. "I was lucky to find the way I could best serve my field. As an administrator, I design services and programs to help women in need reach their goals. I create paths for them."

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