

they have no place to sleep?"

One person who's been helped by Calkins is the MIND Project's Beth, who lives in shared housing supplied by Permahousing.

Another Permahousing beneficiary is Shelley, 27, who lives with her daughter, Brenda, a brighter-than-average 2-year-old with huge saucer eyes, in a sparsely furnished but comfortable apartment they share with another family headed by a mentally disabled mother.

Started in 1985, Calkins' nonprofit operations now offer 40 beds at six different sites. In addition, Calkins' is the first local organization to offer mentally impaired mothers a chance to live in a supported setting along with their children.

"There should be more programs like this," says Shelley, as Brenda clings shyly to her leg. Learning-impaired and blind in one eye, Shelley says she often has been misdiagnosed. "I'm not mentally ill," she says firmly, "I'm mentally disabled. I'm not sick, I just need a little help sometimes."

Shelley says her hardest moments came when she twice lost custody of her daughter. The last incident occurred right before she met Calkins. "I was living in a shelter and they told me I was a negligent mother because I left Brenda alone once," Shelley recalls. Months of battles with the juvenile protection authorities ensued, but with the help of testimonials from her social worker and her foster parents, and promises from Calkins that Shelley would receive housing and parenting help, eventually convinced a judge to award custody to Shelley. "It was the happiest day," Shelley says.

Calkins, who also serves as Brenda's godmother, says it's good to keep families together whenever possible. "Foster homes can't replace a mother's love," she says, "and Shelley is a very good parent." The key, says Calkins, is to provide the right mix of freedom and support to keep families functional. "These kids are at risk and have to be monitored carefully," she says.

Originally, Calkins intended to fund her project with foundation funds generated by a proposal she crafted with the help of the county's mental health bureau. "But when we got rejected for the grant, the county stepped in and said they'd fund us anyway," Calkins recalls, adding that Zoe Lofgren's support was "crucial."

Calkins says her achievements should encourage the county to run its own housing program. "I've told them to go ahead and put me out of business," she says. Given that Calkins is paid just \$18,000 a year for a job that often requires considerably more than 40 hours a week, it's unlikely the county will soon find a replacement for her. "She's spectacular," says Supervisor Lofgren, "and she is an example of what can be done with even limited resources." ■