Cozy bedrooms help kids get more than just sleep

July 31, 2019 by Corinna Vangerwen

Photography by Brooke Schaal

Room for a Child transforms bare-bones living spaces into calming refuges for GTA kids in need

Dawn Gillespie had just finished hanging four new towels—one for each of four sisters, making it the first time they wouldn't have to share one—in the children's newly made-over bedroom. It was one of three kids' bedrooms that Room for a Child volunteers had completed for a family of 10 living in government housing. After rushing home from school and checking out her new digs, the youngest girl—a four-year-old—excitedly ran down the stairs to stop Gillespie as she was heading out the door. "Did you bring the butterflies?" she asked with intense seriousness. She was referring to the decals that Gillespie had only just moments before arranged in a fluttering formation across the wall over the children's new desk.

"Yes, I did," said Gillespie.

The girl reached out to pat Gillespie on the arm and said, "Oh, you're such a good girl!"

Seeing kids light up when their bedrooms are transformed into beautiful, welcoming spaces is what drives Gillespie to keep doing this work. A former school principal, she started Room for a Child in 2012 to help kids in economically disadvantaged families in the GTA by providing them with bedroom makeovers. Gillespie spent her last years as a principal at a school in the Jane and Sheppard area, and after her retirement found she missed working with children. Over the past five years, her non-profit organization has upgraded bare-bones spaces into calming refuges for more than 100 kids ranging up to age 16.

The extent of a makeover depends on the child's needs. For one, a five-year-old boy whose clothes had been kept in a broken bedside table received what he called "a big-boy dresser," along with a new bed and a fresh coat of paint on the walls. In another home, school-aged twins who had been sleeping with their mom in her bed were given their own bunk bed. After one family's apartment had a bedbug infestation, they had to toss their young teen's mattress. The youth was sleeping halfway on a crib mattress someone at church had given them, with his legs extending onto the floor. Room for a Child brought in a new bed and topped it with blue-and-turquoise mandala-patterned linens, along with a refinished dresser painted white and a handmade wooden reading lamp for the young book lover.

To provide these kids with furniture and accessories, Room for a Child relies on individuals and local businesses to donate things like furniture, paint and even storage space. A network of volunteers that includes off-duty police officers, teachers, parents with their adult kids, and retirees provides free labour to help paint walls, build bunk beds, sew curtains and pitch in wherever help is needed. Gillespie's husband is the "Chief Retired Old Guy," who organizes all the necessary supplies and ensures ready-charged tools are available when needed, and also occasionally directs teams of volunteers. When volunteers are busy with a project, everyone works well together and is in high spirits. "It's amazing," says Gillespie. "They feel good for having made a difference. That's what keeps us all going."

What Gillespie struggles with, though, is what she calls the "two Ms": mattresses and money. Donated twin-size mattresses are hard to come by. "The mattresses have to be pristine," says Gillespie. "Just because these kids are poor doesn't mean they should sleep in someone else's stains." When she doesn't have a donated mattress for a project, Gillespie has to dig into Room for a Child's limited budget and buy a new one.

Being a non-profit that isn't able to give out tax receipts limits who is willing to donate funds. She's thankful for the donations she's received from groups like the Westmount United Church in Orillia, a local retired teachers' organization and 100 Kids Who Care in Stouffville, and is most touched by the small $50 donations from individuals who don't have much to give. She knows how to make those dollars stretch; for example, buying accessories like the butterfly decals from dollar stores, shopping Ikea for bed linens and frequenting the Habitat for Humanity ReStore.

Children who could benefit from a room makeover are referred to Room for a Child by a network of school principals and social workers from the Toronto, York and Durham school boards; they also come in via settlement workers, who work with refugees, shelters and public-health nurses. Once a kid is approved, Gillespie will then meet with the parent or caregiver to assess the child's needs, interests and tastes, and plan the makeover. "Because everything is donated, it's not going to look like something off of HGTV," says Gillespie, but the impact is much greater than just a better-looking space.

Besides the practical impacts, such as no longer having to keep clothes in boxes or share one towel between four sisters, a properly outfitted bedroom gives these children a place they can call their own, and a calm space to find respite from sometimes-stressful lives.

"I've had families tell me they have no trouble waking their kids up for school now that they're sleeping in a proper bed," says Gillespie. One parent, after seeing how Gillespie and her team transformed the space, told her that she learned something important from the experience: "She said, 'I learned you don't have to have a lot of money to make a difference.'"

The children notice the difference, too. One 12-year-old girl with three little brothers, who now has a room to herself, told Gillespie that the best part of the makeover was the desk. "She said, 'I can do my homework, I can close the door and read or write poetry, and my little brothers can't bother me,'" recalls Gillespie. She also gives all kids a package of school supplies as a parting gift and strives to place a desk in every bedroom. "Parents want their kids to do better than them, and it's not going to happen if they don't have a proper place to do their homework," she explains.

Some of the most powerful feedback she received from a parent came after Room for a Child made over three bedrooms for three siblings in a subsidized townhouse. A few days after the makeover, the mother found her eight-year-old son, who required special-ed accommodations, quietly reading alone in his bedroom. She told Gillespie, "I have never seen him choose to read before."

For Gillespie, it's the children who keep her going. She started Room for a Child because she missed working with the children as a principal. And she doesn't get disheartened by seeing the poverty. "I can sympathize and empathize, but as long as I can make a difference, I'm good," she says.

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