

NO PLACE TO CALL HOME



Photographed by Jo Wezet

Sharon Conway led an ordinary, uneventful, happy life: she had a husband, children, a comfortable home. Then her husband lost his job, and soon the Conways found themselves on the street. But Sharon refused to be homeless—and turned her family's private misfortune into a public crusade.

By Miriam Van Scott

Two years ago, Sharon Conway—"Shari" to family and friends—spent her days taking care of her family: her husband, Christopher, a television sound engineer; their two-year-old son, Chris; and her two sons from a previous marriage, Wesley, 13, and Lee, 11. She felt content and secure in the three-story town house they rented in Springfield, Va., an affluent suburb of Washington, D.C. Shari had no way of foreseeing the troubles that lay ahead.

Before Christmas 1987, Christopher developed a stomach disorder that left him unable to work for four

months. "We lived on his disability income—half his regular salary," Shari explains.

Christopher recovered, but within a week of his return to work, his unit went out on strike over a contract dispute. His income dropped to zero. After struggling through the winter, the Conways had only \$1,700 left in savings—and very few options.

Shari had family living in the area but was reluctant to ask them for help. Her brother had three children, and his wife was expecting a fourth; her younger sister was just coming out of a divorce and also had financial problems. Shari's father, living in Florida, "was going through his own crisis" since Shari's mother had died recently.

To save money, Shari half-jokingly suggested her family stay at a local campground for a while. "I remembered going to Burke Lake as a kid. I figured we would 'go camping' until we could get back on our feet."

In preparation, they sold off

some of their furniture so they wouldn't have so much to move. Friends and neighbors came to buy items at the yard sale Shari held, but she soon discovered they felt uncomfortable if she brought up the reason for the sale. "They talked about anything else—the kids, the weather. They didn't want to admit that this was happening to us—because if it was, then it could happen to them."

The Conways packed the rest of their belongings into a trailer and moved to the campground, where they figured they could live for \$9 a night while they waited for the strike to be over. The two older boys went to live with their father in Florida.

Christopher took odd jobs to earn whatever money he could, and Shari began setting up a budget to rebuild their savings. But living at the camp turned out to be more costly than they'd anticipated. "We had no electricity and couldn't store food, so we

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Shari, Chris, and dog Rusty at campground