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This Organization Makes Homeless Shelters Feel a Little More Like Home

A Lotta Love turns barracks into inviting spaces.

BY HADLEY KELLER · AUG 2, 2019

BEFORE **AFTER**





A LOTTA LOVE | Original article image

A cement-floored, bare-walled room with a metal-framed cot, a thin mattress, and threadbare sheets. If you're picturing a jail cell, you wouldn't be wrong, but this is also the sight of most homeless shelters. When homeless people are offered space in a shelter, it can be a literally lifesaving moment—but the conditions are hardly inviting. Such was the reality that Charlotta (Lotta) Sjoeli aimed to change when she began A Lotta Love in 2014.

Swedish-born Lotta had recently moved to the United States from Switzerland and welcomed a son when a friend brought her to a women's shelter in her hometown of Chapel Hill, North Carolina. She was struck by the conditions. "They said they needed pillows, and I was thinking throw pillows," Lotta recalls. "I got there and I realized they didn't have a single pillow on the beds."



A shelter common area before and after redecoration. | A LOTTA LOVE

"I broke down and cried," she says. She decided on the spot to use her skills to make what changes she could at the shelter. "I thought, I'm going to come back and see what I can do," she recalls. "So I went home and brought back some decor I had at home and did that first room."

That was the beginning of A Lotta Love, an organization that has now outfitted some 100 rooms in a dozen shelters across North Carolina, changing dismal temporary quarters into inviting spaces—with decor that residents can pack up and take with them when they find a permanent home outside the shelter.

From that first visit, Lotta was especially struck by the reality that "these are children getting on the same bus as my children to go to school." Indeed, though it can be easy to think of homelessness as a faraway problem, the reality is that no matter where you live in America, chances are it's a lot closer to you than you think. "I wanted to get the point across that many of us may be just a paycheck or an illness away from being homeless," the founder says.

That's the same idea that resonated with Heather Garrett, a Raleigh designer who came across A Lotta Love after searching for a more meaningful service opportunity in her hometown.

Having been involved in community service since her grandfather brought her on his Meals on Wheels routes as a young girl, Heather says that as a high-end designer, "the thing that's hard is that my talents and interest have led me to a career that is making very wealthy people feel even wealthier."

At the same time, though, she says, "I really believe in the difference that your environment at home can make as a way to relate to your family. I was really struggling with that for several years. I was like, OK, if I believe that—which I do—how can I remain sort of working in this bubble and going to the shelter on Saturdays without trying to figure out a way to merge the two, somehow?"

After looking into a few organizations that weren't quite a fit, Heather was chatting with her intern, who mentioned A Lotta Love. "I had been trying to figure out how I could merge the design community and service, and it was just crazy. It was like the two of them at the same time. So we decided to get together, and we had coffee. And she has amazing stories about the impact that changes like this can make in somebody's life living in the shelter."

Heather has vowed to help in rallying the design community to support the project, and, as a further show of support, she has pledged to donate one room for every design project she completes. It costs $500 to outfit a room with A Lotta Love, and the room's occupants get to keep the decor when they move out, further continuing the concept of a permanent, inviting, personal home

"When I start working with clients, I'm always asking about the trouble areas," Heather says. "And what you realize is that those contribute to your family problems. You know, maybe it's hard to connect with your spouse when there's no place that feels good. So I started realizing, Gosh, If that's the case, then imagine a terrified child, or a mother who's totally overwhelmed. To make a soft place where a mom can curl up with her child and read a story before bed with a little nightlight, or giving the child a stuffed animal that they can take with them. I mean, even that simple thing—it's a lot."

To learn more about A Lotta Love or donate a room, click here.

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