As the old saying goes, “There’s no time like the present.”

In a rural corner of Pennsylvania, Elaine Newkirk has made that saying a way of life.

When she was 23, her 14-year-old sister moved in. Shortly after, her sister’s two friends moved in as well. To keep the girls there, she became a foster mom. Since then, she has opened up her home to over 60 foster children, their friends, siblings, and community members.

Then, when a young mother was unable to care for her two infants, she immediately took them in as her own—in addition to caring for her own infant.

Today, a single mother of 5 teenagers—4 of whom are adopted and 3 of whom are disabled—Elaine spends her days running TYME (Teach Youth, Motivate, and Empower) Ministries, a program dedicated to bringing resources and services to youth, homeless, and populations in need.

Similar to Elaine’s foster parenting, TYME began with her sister and friends, several of whom were teenage moms:

My sister was a teenager at the time and I told her and some of her friends, ‘If you guys have things that you want to talk about—problems and things that you’re going through in your life—we can get together and talk about it.’

What began as a gathering of six kids that lasted all afternoon, swelled into a group of
twenty the following week. And even more the next week. Each week, more and more youth came to connect, and Elaine’s house was bursting at the seams.

Realizing that this was a real community need, she rented out a church room for their weekly gatherings. Then, she found a bigger house.

Today, TYME has grown into a not-for-profit thrift store, bakery, and youth center, with programs ranging from cooking classes to acting troupes and everything in-between.

TYME’s thrift store is one of Elaine’s main projects. A 100% not-for-profit entity, the store receives clothing donated from the community. Then, it offers almost all of its clothes at a dollar or less per article of clothing. More expensive items, such as prom tuxedos and gowns, go for 5-10 dollars. All the profits earned go into keeping their doors open, nothing more.

And all sorts of people shop at their store. Patrons come in with referrals from churches, schools, organizations, and the local government. Larger organizations like the Red Cross send victims of natural disasters to TYME. Schools that notice children coming in with dirty clothes direct their families there.

“People who are going to court can come in and get a suit from us in order to dress appropriately in court,” Elaine explains. “We work with the Department of Labor and people who are going for job interviews. They come and can get a suit from us—that makes a difference in terms of whether or not they get a job. And if they get the job, we make sure to give them clothes that will sustain them.”

But the thrift shop is only the beginning.

With her home already a ‘hangout spot’ for her sister and children’s friends, Elaine’s TYME Ministries is also a youth center—where kids in the community come in for programs such as dance, cooking, and acting classes. Teen moms can learn child-rearing skills. And most recently, she started Hav Sommo Cafe, a bakery adjacent to the thrift store whose proceeds get recycled into making afterschool meals for children whose family budgets are tight.

“People don’t realize that a lot of kids depend on school breakfast and lunch in order to eat, and without a lot of those, the children go hungry. So we make sure that there’s a
meal for them,” Elaine states.

At first glance, Elaine sounds like superwoman. Yet amidst all this activity, rather than feeling burdened or burned out, she sees each moment is an act of grace. An invitation to do what needs to be done.

Even when the way forward is not easy, she doesn’t let uncertainty stop her:

“I go through times where I’m struggling to pay my bills, but I look at that not as a reason for me to shut down and stop doing what I’m doing. Instead, it helps me realize how blessed I am and that there’s always a way. But there are some people out there who don’t have that. And if I’m not doing it, who’s going to do that for them?”

Beyond that, Elaine is clear that—with this work—she’s never in it alone.

“I think the biggest thing that I’ve learned is that, even though I have a “save the world’ mentality, I can’t save the world on my own. It takes the help of the community,” she shares. “Once you get the community empower to make a difference in lives, you’d be surprised to see what your community is willing to do.”

Different projects that she originally seeded have now grown and empowered other community members to take the lead. A few years ago, when she was focused on providing services for pregnant teens, another woman got interested. She began teaching them cooking and parenting skills, and now runs that program. Same with the acting troupe.

“And the woman who runs that now—she really takes the kids off the street and gives them a positive place to go and something positive to do,” Elaine remarks. “So little ideas sprout up, and then someone will take it and nurture it from there. I think the main thing is to involve the community. This is not something you can do alone.”

In her own family, she sees her children—now between the ages of 14 and 16—and sister as an incredible blessing.

“I wouldn’t have been able to do a lot of things without them, too, because it takes them
sharing their mom with the world,” she points out.

Raising five kids—three with disabilities—is no walk in the park. Yet with a service-hearted mom like Elaine, it’s no surprise that her children have grown to exemplify those same values.

“My kids have been really great with that. Even when there’s homeless kids that come into the program, they embrace them and make them feel welcome. They make sure they’re not ostracized in school. They’ve become like protectors to some of the kids in the community.”

She also shares, “When I see them doing things that I didn’t think to do—that touches me the most. Last Christmas, they came up with the idea of going to a domestic violence shelter and serving them meals—and really, just serving them. Because they’re older now, I think that was something that really touched my heart. They came out there on their own and just wanted to prepare a meal for these families. And just serve them and show them that someone cares for them and loves them.”

From her stories, it’s easy to see how her children simply mirror back the love that she pours out. Her youngest son was diagnosed with brain damage and autism. Doctors said he’d never walk, talk, or live past the age of three. Today he’s fourteen years old and walking, talking, and singing in the church choir.

Parenting for Elaine has also informed the nuances of her social work:

Parenting has taught me how to see the best in people when they’re doing their best. That helps me to look beyond my children to see people that I deal with in my everyday life. A lot of people will look at homeless families and say, “Well, why don’t they just get a job?”

A lot of times, things are just going on in their lives and it’s just not going well right now. We have a lot of homeless people going out there literally every day and putting in applications for jobs. They’ll come to me and say, “Well, why isn’t anybody hiring me?”

You’ve got to find that greatness in them and then just tell them it’ll come. Something great is going to happen. I learn that from watching children push through things. Especially seeing my youngest son—the one with autism—learn to talk and walk. Even
though he was almost 7 years old when he first started walking. To really see him do that, it gives you resilience and perseverance. And it takes patience, but greatness comes.

Throughout it all—whether as a mother, a public speaker, thrift store manager, baker, acting teacher, or simply a listening ear, Elaine is an endless reserve of hope, a wellspring of compassion, and a solid pillar of faith.

The morning we spoke, it was a Sunday, and her car had broken down in her church parking lot. Though her sister had to make two trips to bring everyone home and car repairs costs are well above her budget, Elaine carries it all with the buoyancy of gratitude:

I could sit here and carry on and get depressed about all that—but then I think, there are families that don’t have cars. And there are families that don’t have food. I’m blessed that my sister’s here and she has a car—so we have a second car in the home. I have so much and I’m still very thankful and grateful...

Maybe it’s meant for me to walk right now. Maybe in my walking, I’m going to pass somebody who doesn’t know about my services and I could tell them about it and we could help them out.

I just hold on to hope. You just have to. You can’t let it get you down.

To hold on to hope.

“That starts with us,” she says, her voice solid with an unwavering conviction. “People don’t realize that, but it starts with us.”