HOMETOWN HEROES
A range of transitional housing programs assist Arizonans in need, including:

1. Homeward Bound, Phoenix. Serves families with children fleeing domestic violence and/or homelessness. homewardboundaz.org

2. Chapel Haven, Tucson. Serves adults with developmental disabilities and autism spectrum disorders. chapelhaven.org

3. Catholic Charities, Cottonwood and Flagstaff. Serves low-income and/or homeless individuals and families. cccathcharitiesaz.org

FORMER DRUG addict, An abused mother and child, A developmentally disabled young woman, A college student with autism. Their stories differ, but they share a common thread: Each person needs a place to call home.

Across Arizona, nonprofit organizations are providing transitional housing programs, along with crucial support services, to assist these individuals and families. The programs are critical to promoting self-sufficiency and independence, and touch people in need every day.

Catholic Charities is offering one of those life-changing programs. The faith-based nonprofit’s permanency housing programs in Cottonwood and Flagstaff provide subsidized housing to homeless families with at least one parent with a diagnosed substance use disorder.

The program does have certain requirements, however. Participants must be employed and enrolled in a recovery program. They must also have scheduled meetings with a caseworker, attend life skills classes and contribute a minimum of 5 percent of their income to a savings plan.

Another organization dedicated to changing lives is First Place in Phoenix. For founder Denise Resnik, it’s where hope lives. There, adults with autism and other special abilities will find a safe place to live and learn and grow. They will find support and independence. And they will find a community focused on helping lead them to their next place.

First Place is a project almost two decades in the making for Resnik, whose autistic son Max is 23 years old and working hard to find his way in the world.

"I have been working on this plan almost since the first day the school bus arrived," says Resnik, president of DRA Strategic Communications and co-founder of the Southwest Autism Research & Resource Center (SARRC). "I was determined that he and others like him would have far greater [living] choices than those I have toured."

First Place is set to open its pilot site this fall in collaboration with SARRC and the Foundation for Senior Living. The campus includes six two-bedroom apartments for students with autism, age 18 and older; 15 apartments for senior citizens; a community center and a community garden. Individualized programs will help students develop independent living skills as they engage in work, community college and/or SARRC training programs.

The future First Place mixed-use property, supported by a $15 million capital campaign now underway, will open in mid-2016. Plans call for 50 apartments leased by residents who are supported by independent living services. In addition, a tuition-based academy will assist students transitioning to independent living and a leadership institute will bring together experts focused on creating more housing choices.

Resnik sees a bright future for First Place beyond Arizona. She envisions the project being replicated elsewhere to improve home options.

For Resnik, "First Place is about hope and fulfilling a dream that adults with autism can have a home of their own, a job, friends and a community that supports them."