For families who have a loved one incarcerated in the Texas prison system, life can be full of confusion.

Scarce visitation and long distances traveled to see their mother, father, sister or brother can take a toll on even the strongest family unit. Hotels are immensely expensive and many simply cannot bear the weight alone.

Fortunately, for those families with an inmate housed in Huntsville, the Hospitality House welcomes all with open doors.

Over the last three decades, the Hospitality House has provided shelter, food, ministry and a warm embrace to those who need them the most. Located just a few blocks away from the Huntsville “Walls” Unit, the volunteers and staff of the house care for the needs of the entire family without any question, while providing walls of their own that are welcoming and safe.

One often overlooked aspect of prison visitation is the time the family spends waiting. For the children, idle time can make a difficult situation worse.

For the last four years, Sam Houston State art professor Edie Wells has spearheaded a program called Art Against the Odds, which provides exciting arts and crafts for the children of families staying at the Hospitality House. Children and parents alike have a chance to make work freely during the weekly program, using art as a method to relax, spend time together and enjoy something creative and fun.

“I had just moved to Huntsville and I didn't know anything about the prison community and I had never lived near a prison before,” Wells said. “I found statistics from TDCJ and other prisons that said children with an incarcerated parent are more likely to end up in prison as well if they don't have some sort of mentoring or intervention in their lives.”
"I found the Hospitality House and they were more than willing to let me come and do art with the kids on the weekends in hopes that it would give them some kind of outlet where they could express what they’re going through."

What started out as an idea for a weekend program quickly turned into a full-blown community effort, with Sam Houston Students volunteering their time and energy to interact with the kids who frequent the house. Through Academic Community Engagement courses at SHSU, Wells has facilitated dozens of students’ involvement in the program, giving them the chance to mentor children at the house and become an integral part of their lives through art.

“My favorite part of working at the Hospitality House is seeing the kids faces after they’ve done something that they can claim as their own,” sophomore education major Carly Jordan said after volunteering all last year. "Just seeing the smiles on their faces after they finish an art piece is the best part.”

New volunteer and freshman interdisciplinary studies major Cody Noto noted that simply being there and becoming involved brought joy to the children of the house.

"The most rewarding part of it all is just seeing the happiness of the kids," Noto said. "It is so rewarding to be a part of the reason that they were happy and having fun."

"The students have such a big influence on the kids because they are closer to their age and they set such a good example," Wells added. "It’s so great for the kids to see students who are making it and going to college.”

With limited room inside the Hospitality House, it was soon understood that a dedicated space needed to be created for the art program so the students could have a place to personalize and call their own.

Local artist and world-renowned art-space builder Dan Philips, along with an army of volunteers, stepped up to help realize plans for a Children’s Activity Building that could house the art program while maintaining a non-profit budget.

The free standing structure, which was completed just months ago, now offers the house a unique, dedicated space decorated from top to bottom with the students make.

"Dan and the volunteers have just been amazing," director of the Hospitality House Debra McCammon said. "His vision and his willingness to make this happen has just been wonderful for the families and the children that stay here. We would just get so slammed during the weekends and we'd have art spread all across the tables inside. Having this building is such a blessing."

"The new studio looks amazing," Jordan added. "It’s so great to see the art that the kids did hanging up on the ceiling. My hand prints are on the left wall when you walk in, it’s a really good feeling."

With the new space, Art Against the Odds now has new opportunity to grow and include more activities and children into the now twice-a-week program. With a host of volunteers and donations from the Sam Houston State University Art Department and other agencies, the students have the supplies needed to continue their creative efforts.

"We’re so very fortunate that Edie, the professors and students give of their time," McCammon added. "I’m not sure where else you’ll see masters level art teachers give their time for free and come and hang out with children who are in need. They’re just so gracious, it’s really amazing. Families call this place a home away from home. It’s just very relaxing for the children and with all the chaos and the struggles that they’re going through, it’s just such a place of healing.

Whether it be through painting, drawing or even the act of decorating cookies, the Art Against the Odds program has shown that a unique, creative space can bring out a child’s passion and usher in a sense of openness and trust through the simple act of creation.

Wells harkened back to a story that stuck with her, when she knew that the program had the capacity to open a line of communication that may not have been realized without art.

“There was one girl who was 16-years old at the time and she was one of the first ones to have a break through,” Wells remembered. “She did an art piece that had two hands that were not able to touch. They were really close, but they never touched. During the painting, she started talking about how hard it was for her to not have contact visits with her dad and how she could only visit with him through the glass. After two years of her father being incarcerated, that was the first time her mother said she’d ever been able to talk about it.

“It was just a very simple thing, but it offered her a safe place to open up.”
The Hospitality House will be holding the official grand opening for the new Children’s Activity Building on Oct. 27 from 3 to 6 p.m. The public is invited to attend the event to see the art made by the children and meet Dan Phillips who will be in attendance from 3 to 4 p.m.

Art Against the Odds program has also been featured over the past week in the the Lowman Student Center Gallery on the Sam Houston campus in an exhibition curated by Wells entitled “Interplay.” The show will remain open until Saturday afternoon and is also open to the public.

For more information on the Hospitality House, or to donate, visit www.thehospitalityhouse.org.