

# It Takes a Village: More than a Proverb in the Hilltowns of Western Massachusetts

[www.vidalecheamor.com/blogs/news/the-village-closet](http://www.vidalecheamor.com/blogs/news/the-village-closet)

“We believe motherhood is not meant to be done alone. We believe that a mother who is well nurtured can better care for herself, her baby, and her family. We believe that community health and wellness begins with mothers.” [It Takes a Village](#) is not just a proverb in the Hilltowns of Western Massachusetts, it's a unique and inspirational non-profit organization that utilizes local volunteers to provide the services neighbors once provided to new mothers in rural areas. I met with It Takes a Village's Lisa Goding and Mollie Hartford at the [Florence Pie Bar](#) to discuss the organization and their experiences as breastfeeding mothers over a delicious bite to eat.

*Mollie and her son, Calvin on left; Lisa on right*

Mollie cut right down to business, as she held her contented 7 month old son, Calvin. Mollie speaks with an excited eloquence that conveys her love and enthusiasm for her work. [It Takes a Village](#) was started in 2009 by Cummington, MA mother Maureen Shea. Maureen had done all of her research, found the perfect midwife, and hired a doula while pregnant. Even with all of her preparation, Maureen felt overwhelmed after the birth of her baby. Mollie explained, “She looked around and said, 'This is hard. It shouldn't be this hard. Where's my village? Where are the people helping me?’” Mollie went on to explain that in Cummington, a town of less than 900 people nestled in the hills of Massachusetts' Pioneer Valley, it is common to literally have no neighbors. One day, Maureen had a friend come over to hold her baby while she had a shower, caught up with housework, and had an adult conversation – Maureen's first in weeks. She was astounded at how those two hours changed how she felt about everything. Inspired by her experiences, Maureen decided to help the next friend who gave birth. Those two friends helped out the next new mother in their circle, and the group grew. Maureen started collecting donations of baby items in her basement to give to new mothers. The small circle of friends organically evolved into an organized program that now trains volunteers to help new mothers.

The basement collection grew into the Village Closet, which provides a wide range of baby items to local mothers for free.





*Mollie, in our [Adira Nursing Top](#)*

Lisa joined us after “settling” her exuberant 6 year old daughter, Toni and 2 year old son Stephen at the other end of the outdoor seating, where Stephen immediately starting running around, occasionally leaving the roped off area of the restaurant, and Toni began playing with a stranger's toddler. Lisa apologized, saying, “I'm always in a whirlwind of chaos.” She sat down with almost feigned exasperation and jokingly announced, “I don't like him very much right now,” flashing a loving smile. Her sarcastic sense of humor and openness about the struggles and underlying joy of raising spirited children is endearing.



*Lisa and her children Stephen and Toni*

Both Mollie and Lisa originally started out as volunteers with [It Takes a Village](#) about two years ago. Lisa explained, “I saw the brochures and people kept telling me I’d be a good volunteer. Just as I was about to start my volunteer training, I got pregnant with Stephen, and I am *not* a good pregnant person. It’s just so hard for me. My training had to wait until after Stephen was born. Then, I had Stephen, and everything changed. It was so hard. I had to put off the training again. When I was finally about to start the training, the person doing the training was leaving and the Family Coordinator position was the only position left. It was going to be an easy peasy job – 5 hours a week. Then, I turned it into a full-time job.” Mollie joins Lisa’s amusement about their shared work ethic and overly enthusiastic take on their new position as volunteers. “Since we had business backgrounds,” Mollie explained, “We just started taking things to the next level,” which included filling out the appropriate paperwork, building a website, bringing on more people, and getting donations. “It Takes a Village grew bigger than we ever thought it would be. It’s a lot of work, but it’s gratifying.”

One of It Takes a Village’s main programs is home visits for moms of children one year and younger. A volunteer visits a family with a new baby once a week for 12 weeks for about two hours at a time. Volunteers do the things that neighbors would traditionally do: have an adult conversation, hold the baby, do the dishes and the laundry, and play with older kids. The volunteers allow new moms to take care of themselves, which in turn helps the entire family. Mollie explains, “It’s nice to just be able to say, ‘Here, you hold the baby and I’ll take a shower and not worry about anything for 10 minutes.’” She recalls a visit she had with a family with a 4 year old and a new baby. “I brought some of my son’s toys over to play with the older child. The mom asked, ‘How do you have the patience for this?’ And I said, ‘He’s not my kid!’ This mom really liked cleaning her bathroom, so while I played with her older kid and held her baby, she cleaned her bathroom. It’s just about being able to feel normal and to feel supported.”

Mollie, who is currently in the middle of moving with her 5 year old and 7 month old sons, also has a volunteer from It Takes a Village. “It’s astonishing how much we got done in 1 ½ hours with some help. The baby just wants to be held all the time.” Mollie uses her own experiences with getting help from volunteers to inspire other moms to accept help, as it is common for some mothers to be reluctant. “We know you can do this by yourself,” she explains, “But you’re not meant to do it by yourself. You deserve help. We’re supposed to be in a society where we have the damn village! Taking the help doesn’t mean you can’t do it.”

Since [It Takes a Village](#) has grown exponentially, they now have the capacity to reach out to community members who are struggling, including teen moms and domestic violence survivors. They have a partnership with [Healthy Families](#), a national program that works to prevent child maltreatment and promote positive parenting, and the [Grace House](#), which is a nearby residential treatment program for mothers in recovery and their families. As Lisa got up to chase her children, who were leaving the [Pie Bar's](#) seating area to play in the yard of a house two doors down, Mollie explained, "It Takes a Village is great for moms in recovery. It's that safety net. We're not meant to navigate the system alone. People can call us and we'll say, 'You need housing? Call Dave!' Who else would know to call Dave except us? If we can't help, we send them to someone who can." Just as Lisa returned with her kids and sat down, Stephen left again. With her bemused smile, she said to us, "He can run away. That's fine. As long as he doesn't get hit by a car. Maybe I should go get him..." and she's off again.

In addition to the volunteer home visits, [It Takes a Village](#) has drop in mothers' support groups that offer snacks, childcare, and a safe space for new moms to share their experiences. They have also expanded the original basement full of stuff into The Village Closet, which is housed in a classroom of a decommissioned school. "It's great because it keeps the community coming into the building. It keeps the school as a gathering place for families which is great for community." The Village Closet was able to give away \$20,000 worth of baby gear to local families last year, thanks to their new space. "It's great because we can keep the big things out for people to see. Sometimes cribs don't even get in the door. We were bringing one in one time and a family was visiting the closet at the same time. We just said, 'Great! Can you put this in her car?'" Lisa recalled another touching story that really illustrates the power of The Village Closet and their intuitive volunteers. "We had a family coming in with two kids, a newborn and a toddler, and they were in a single stroller. The toddler was hanging off the handlebars. We had a double stroller, so we gave it to her. She cried." Mollie, also visibly emotional, added, "Lisa recognized her struggle. 'I see you struggling and I can help. You don't have to ask. I can see it and I can help.' We recognize what is hard for moms, and we fix it."



*Mollie Nursing Calvin in our [Adira Nursing Top](#)*

As Calvin got ready to nurse, the conversation turned to breastfeeding. Mollie reminisced about nursing her older son, which was easy for her, and the surprisingly difficult time she had breastfeeding when Calvin was first born. "First, he just had a funny latch. Then, it became extremely painful to nurse him. He started losing weight, and we were in the doctor's office every other day for weigh-ins." Mollie visited lactation consultants and doctors for help, to no avail. "It became a cycle. He was losing weight and getting weak. He started falling asleep at the breast. I would think, 'He's doing great! He's always nursing,' but he wasn't getting enough because he kept falling asleep,

which is why I was nursing so often. My supply got lower, and it was just this really bad cycle until there was almost nothing there.” Her pediatrician thought it was a tongue tie and sent her to an ENT 30 minutes away, telling her that they made an appointment and she could just show up. She showed up, ended up waiting 2 hours because no appointment was made, and after a 30 second consultation, the ENT told her what she already knew – “It’s not a tongue tie.” Mollie, reliving the ordeal, angrily recalled, “So, of course, I called my pediatrician and I got on my high horse about how they treat new moms, bawling my eyes out. I said, ‘It’s unacceptable to tell me you made me an appointment when you didn’t and send me and my two week old baby who is having trouble nursing to sit in an ENT’s office with a bunch of sick people.’” Her training and experience make Mollie attuned to even “small” oversights that can severely complicate a new mother’s life, and she makes sure to point it out, which makes a huge difference for all mothers in the community. Mollie soon found a doctor who could help her with her breastfeeding problem, and began nursing for 45 minute increments with breast compressions followed by a “topping off” with pumped breastmilk while she held Calvin close and pumped while he took the bottle. “It was two weeks of this. It was so intense and I wanted to quit so many times. I was lucky because I had help and I had food in my freezer. We didn’t have to cook for 6 weeks, and people kept coming over to do laundry. I was able to sit there and nurse and pump all day long.” With help from the community, Mollie and Calvin got through the initial difficulties and now have a great nursing relationship. “I finally saw that I was packing more and more milk into the freezer instead of Calvin drinking it, and I knew it was all over.”

#### *Lisa nursing Stephen in our [Callie Nursing Maxi Dress](#)*

Stephen also came to join the breastfeeding session. Lisa playfully announced, “I’m the oldest nursing mom in Northampton!” She recalls her first breastfeeding journey with her older daughter, “I knew I wanted to nurse and when I was pregnant with Toni, I put all the right things in place. I made an appointment with a lactation consultant before she was born. She was like, ‘Uh, people usually wait until there’s a problem to call me.’ I’m a registered dietician, and I took a continuing education class on perinatal nutrition. It’s funny because I expected to have all these problems breastfeeding, but Toni was a great nurser. I nursed her until Stephen was born.” Lisa had planned to follow the World Health Organization’s recommendation of breastfeeding for two years or more, and to let Toni take the lead in weaning. “She just never stopped.” Lisa recalls the anxiety she felt nursing a toddler, and how uncomfortable she felt nursing in public, especially in places with lots of kids and moms. “I felt like they were judging me, like they thought she was too old.” By the time Lisa started feeling uneasy about nursing in public, Toni was old enough to wait until they got home. If she couldn’t wait, Lisa would take her to the bathroom. “I nursed more in public with Toni (as a toddler) than I do with Stephen now. I could never say no to her. She was my first and I couldn’t say no. Whenever I see another woman nursing a toddler, I say, ‘Right on! I’ll nurse right here with you.’”



Mollie, who also practices full-term breastfeeding, echoed Lisa’s discomfort with nursing a toddler in public. “Around 18 months, I thought, ‘You look too big to be nursing.’ Logically, I know you’re not, but, uh, I’d rather not do this on the bus.” But when it comes to full-term nursing, the sweet moments and memories definitely outweigh the occasional discomfort. Lisa shared, “Stephen used to call it ‘Num Nums. Then Toni said to him, ‘Don’t be silly! It’s

called Me Me.” Mollie, laughing, reminisced, “Rowan made up his own sign to nurse. Most kids do the sign for milk. He made up his own sign,” and demonstrated how he used to swipe his pointer finger up and down when he wanted to nurse.

A few days later, I visited the [Village Closet](#), which is open every Tuesday and every other Saturday. As I drove down the beautiful, quiet road, admiring the breathtaking views of hills covered in trees just beginning to change to their fall colors, I passed all the quaint little towns I have visited for Fall Festivals and cutting Christmas trees. As I entered new towns I had never visited, the buildings began to spread further and further apart. I remembered the words Mollie spoke during our interview, “In Cummington, it’s common to literally have no neighbors.” I began to fantasize about moving my family to these beautiful little towns and living a quiet, self-sufficient life in the quiet hills. The music on my car radio began to fade out and the sound of static became bothersome. I hit the scan button, and my radio quickly circled through every station and landed back on the same staticky station I was listening to – the only station my radio could pick up on this part of the road.



Foliage on scenic Route 9, toward Cummington, MA



A beautiful farm on Route 9, MA

I parked my car, and brought my 12 month old to the front door of the decommissioned elementary school. I rang a doorbell and Annie, the director of the Village Closet, to let me in and lead me to the preschool classroom chock full of baby gear. I am immediately greeted by a cute, seasonal display of halloween costumes, and an impressive array of nice winter coats, laid out for the influx of mothers expected to come in as the seasons change. The closet also has a selection of maternity and nursing clothes for mothers, tons of clothes for babies, toddlers, and young children, books, toys, breast and bottle feeding supplies, strollers, cribs, swings, baby seats, cloth and disposable diapers, and just about anything else you could possibly imagine for new families, all neatly packed and organized into a sweet preschool classroom.



*Berkshire Trail Elementary School in Cummington, MA - home of [The Village Closet](#)*

## Welcome to [The Village Closet](#)

Annie is the mother of three children, aged 12, 9, and 10 months. Annie explained, "When you have a baby girl, you get more pink things than you could ever imagine, and pink is just not my jam, so I started coming here to donate things and get different clothes for her." Annie got a volunteer from [It Takes a Village](#) back in December when her daughter was a month old and her family was moving. Annie begins nursing her her daughter as we continue talking. "The only reason I was able to move and start a farm was because of my volunteer. There was no way I would have been able to unpack, milk goats, and help with homework without the volunteer program." Annie began volunteering at the closet 2-3 months ago, and was newly hired as the director of the closet 2-3 weeks ago. "You see the need, you fill the need," Annie explained. "I became the director is because I need to bring my baby to work. Working here, I can stop to nurse her, or take care of her. There's even a changing table right here. It's nice because it's wall to wall moms here. You start hearing, 'Get that out of your mouth! Whose child is this?' It's wall to wall people all the time." Annie explains that her baby loves coming to work because there's tons of stuff to play with and other kids come in with their parents all the time and play together.



## Halloween clothes and costumes available for free at the [Village Closet](#)

Just as Annie finished up nursing her daughter, the doorbell rang. She excitedly told me, "This is a mother who comes here a lot!" She put her baby down and walked down the hall. My son and Annie's daughter pass a plastic dinosaur back and forth, taking turns chewing on it. Annie returned carrying a stroller and a car seat, accompanied by a mom of two boys, one asleep in an umbrella stroller. The mom told Annie, "There's nothing wrong with it. I just don't need it anymore, and I definitely don't need anything that big in my house!" The mom and her son began poking around the books and toys and Annie asked, "Anything you need for your son?"



*Cloth and disposable diapers and winter jackets available for free at the [Village Closet](#)*



*Car seats available for free at the [Village Closet](#)*

The visiting mom has been coming to the closet since May. She exclaimed to me, “I love coming here! It’s great. The kids take a nap in the car and then when we get here, they think it’s playtime. I can talk to the other moms, which is always nice. When my older girls are here, they play outside or in the gym while we’re looking around. I have four kids, and my fiancé is the only one working right now, so it’s great to be able to come here for stuff we need. It’s like a little swap for my kids – they like to bring in old toys or books that they’re done with and get to come home with something new.” [The Village Closet](#) is so much more than free stuff. It’s a drop in social hub for moms with kids. Moms come in, not only to browse, but to chat as they sort through clothes, nurse their babies, and let older children play together. It’s a place for women in a small, spread out community to come together and just be moms together.



Countless children's books are available for free at the [Village Closet](#)



A Lending Library for parents at the [Village Closet](#)

When I left the Village Closet that day, I was incredibly inspired by these women who, as they all explained, saw a need and filled that need. It is incredible to think that this organization that now reaches so many people in the community and provides support and help that so profoundly changes new mothers' lives was started by one woman who turned her personal struggle into a calling to help the next new mother. These inspirational mothers have shown me that the simple act of helping when and where you can, whether by voicing your opinion about how a system is hurting new mothers, donating your old baby items, volunteering your time with an organization, or simply

by sitting and talking to a new mother in your neighborhood, really makes a difference. It takes a village to raise a family, and contributing to your village helps positively impact the world.