200 Bags – by Lisa Gussak

“200 bags”, she said.

I’m sure I looked stunned.

“We hauled out at least 200 bags of garbage. It was horrible. You have no idea.”

She was right, I didn’t. She went on.

“The smell was awful. The fridge was a virtual penicillin factory. The six-year old was still sleeping in a crib. There were makeshift ashtrays fashioned from old food containers all over, many had spilled and leached into the carpet,” she paused to take a deep breath.

I was talking with my friend, who was sharing the details of her weekend with me. A weekend spent in the apartment of her spouse’s daughter, who had recently been admitted to Adcare for a relapse of her heroin addiction.

No one was sure when she started using again. But everyone knew most of the kids’ DVDs and Playstation games had been sold for drug money. No one knew the man who was found living in the apartment, with the daughter and her two young children. But everyone agreed he needed to leave.

Often I have no words for what patients and friends share, and so I listen, nod, sigh and bear witness.

As a mother, I tried to imagine what it would feel like to say, “when my daughter is dead” as this child’s mother said following a family meeting with the treatment team. I listened to the details about who is caring for the children and who would take them for the long-term, if needed.

When there is nothing more to say, I offer a hug and more time together. In this instance, more time will be coffee or a walk. With a patient, it means a phone call or another visit, to hear more of the story. It’s the listening that matters.

That night, as I was lying in bed waiting for sleep, I tried envisioning 200 yellow, city-of-Worcester trash bags on my front lawn. I think it would look like a home that had been destroyed. Or maybe it would look like a disaster had struck. Both of these were true. I closed my eyes and slept.