

Women graduate to better life after yearlong program

By Jessica Boyd

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Tamilee Zeeck didn't know why a friend from church recommended she check out A Hand Up for Women, a 12-month program of twice weekly sessions that deal with emotional and personal development, job readiness and spirituality.

Though she had her share of problems over her 49 years, she wasn't on drugs anymore. She didn't drink alcohol excessively. She had a steady job and an apartment.

However, the program ended up helping her with deeply-rooted emotional issues and allowed her to see how she had alienated people before they had time to reject her.

"It was a way for me to make friends," said Zeeck, of West Knoxville. "I had never been able to do that."

Lexy Godwin, 19, a teenage mom in addiction recovery, knew why she should go to the program, but wasn't sure how it would work with all those women.

"I don't like girls, women. I never have," said Godwin, of Strawberry Plains. "Coming into an environment of all women, I was skeptical."

Now, both women have many female friends who have helped them find themselves; they have friends who are program mentors and past graduates, along with the other two women in their graduating class at A Hand Up.

The graduation was supposed to take place last month, but weather postponed it until Jan. 23 at West Hills Baptist Church.

"I have people in my phone from A Hand Up that I can call at 3 a.m. and say, 'I am having a breakdown,'" Godwin said.

No typical client

Godwin and Zeeck have very different stories, just like all the women who have participated in the program.

"Some of them are high school dropouts. Some have a bachelor's degree," said Eva Pierce, executive director. "Some come from a typical welfare mom and generational poverty."

The women the program has helped become self sufficient over the past eight years range in age from 17 to 63. They come out of abusive relationships or are widowed after 40 years of marriage.

"It doesn't matter their age, race, level of education," Pierce said. "(New participants) very quickly realize they are women dealing with a lot of the same things." She says she's seen a church-going woman confide in a prostitute.

She moved to Knoxville in fifth grade. Between her sophomore and junior years at Karns High School a car accident took her left eye - she wears a plastic one - and left her with a brain injury.

She struggled with schoolwork and teachers just passed her. The accident dashed her dreams of moving to Hollywood to become an actress.

"I took off when I was 18 and just ran," said Zeeck, who works as a driver for NAPA Auto Parts.

She was on the go for more than 12 years moving from place to place, job to job, man to man.

"After the wreck, I did anything I wanted," Zeeck said. "I did drugs, alcohol, slept with a lot of guys. I was living a slow suicide."

She married. She divorced.

She was diagnosed with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, something she believes she had before the crash.

At 44, she moved into a two-bedroom apartment on Clinton Highway and developed a renewed Christian faith at the church she attended as a child.

The she started attending A Hand Up classes.

"I asked Eva two or three times, 'Why am I taking this class?' " Zeeck said. "One day she came up to me and she didn't have to tell me, I knew why I was in the class."

Godwin's journey also started with a traumatic event when she was 16. She became pregnant with her daughter Taylor Atkins while attending Carter High School.

Though she graduated in 2009, her life with her new baby and Taylor's father didn't turn out as planned.

"We just both had so many issues that we weren't ready to deal with, and we turned to drugs both separately and then together," Godwin said. "It was terrible. I was in a place where I had never imagined I would be."

The young couple got to a point where they knew they needed to get help or they were going to die.

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Taylor's paternal grandmother took in Taylor and Godwin went to Serenity Shelter about 10 months ago.

Though Serenity Shelter helped her kick her addiction, she said A Hand Up will help her stay clean because of the strong network of friends it helped her create.

A path to healing

Godwin said A Hand Up was a commitment, both of her time and emotionally.

Women have to attend 80 percent of the classes, complete community service and be progressing toward goals set in a signed contract to graduate.

Pierce said they help women achieve goals by connecting them with local resources, such as food banks. They provide classes on financial training and how to dress for an interview, but also help with their relationship with God.

"You can give us all the skills, but if you don't have a reason to get up in the morning those skills go to waste," Pierce said.

Godwin said she grew up in a religious household but always saw God as judgmental. Through her time at Serenity Shelter and A Hand Up she learned to be loved and accepted.

"There was a purpose for me and not just raising my daughter, not just being a wife," Godwin said.

A Hand Up helped her find singing again. A member of the program's board of directors leads a choir and has asked Godwin to perform with him.

She learned practical skills like putting a tennis ball in the dryer to reduce drying time but also was taught she isn't defined by her past.

"You have to find forgiveness, forgiveness for yourself and for those who have hurt you," Godwin said. "I wasn't what I had done. I wasn't the drugs I did. I wasn't the horrible things I said."

She is now living with her grandparents, working with Pierce on finding a job and planning to reconcile her relationship with Taylor's father. She wants to go to college to become an English teacher.

Zeeck said the class helped her with accepting others and herself.

"They tell you, 'You are beautiful,' " Zeeck said. "I don't believe I am. I used to be. I can't look in the mirror without thinking, 'How did I have that wreck?' "

One class she remembers crying almost every day. It had her confront her issues with anger, resentment and abandonment.

It gave Zeeck more confidence, because others in the program confided in her since

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she had a job and a place to live. Six months ago she bought a condo.

A Hand Up also showed she could complete something despite her ADHD.

Both women said they will continue to go to classes with A Hand Up to bolster what they learned and inspire other women.

"I want to prove to myself, my daughter and my family that I am doing it, instead of just talking about it," Godwin said.

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