

July 6, 2008

Program helps women bounce back after prison

By John Leptich
Tribune



ON THE RIGHT PATH: ^LGail, a cocaine addict for about 25 years, had 15 relapses in as many years. She received a three-year sentence for possession and violating her probation but now works at a law firm and has been drug free for three years. She got the job through a program with Arizona Women's Education & Employment.

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Gail claims to have deep faith. Yet, the north Scottsdale woman admits that for more than a decade her god was crack cocaine.

"I don't even know how it happened," said Gail, who didn't want her last name used for this story. "I was a binge user. It started in 1989 when I was still living in Chicago. I'd go to treatment, stop, go, get back on cocaine. I wasn't dealing with other issues well.

"I realize now that I really didn't want to heal. I just didn't want to feel hurt. I wanted to be numb. My coping mechanism was cocaine. ... Cocaine controlled me completely. I just couldn't stop."

After Gail, 50, violated probation for car theft and cocaine possession in 2005, she received a three-year sentence and served 18 months in the Arizona State Prison Complex in Perryville. While there, Gail learned about Arizona Women's Education & Employment, or AWEE, a work force development program in Phoenix. The group helped her find a job as a legal assistant at a Phoenix law firm. She has worked there since April 2007 and makes \$42,000 a year.

Gail, who has a high school education, says the group helped completely change her life. The group started in 1981 and has served 1,348 individuals for re-entry service since 2003 when it acquired the Women Living Free program targeted to help nonviolent female prisoners make a transition from the Arizona state prison system.

Gail, who first relocated to Arizona in 1991, said she relapsed 15 times in as many years. She kept returning to Chicago for treatment that she said didn't work. For a time, she did word processing work in the law department of Standard Oil in Chicago. She worked for another law firm in the Valley for seven months. But she kept falling back on her old ways.

"My worst times with cocaine was when I came to Phoenix," Gail said. "I fell prey to bad people who wiped out my entire bank account. I lost everything except my car and I had to live in that. My son was with my mother. I was beaten, raped and had a lot of other bad things happen to me.

I just kept going back for more. I didn't think that I could get out of it. Death would have been better."

Gail said most employers wouldn't hire her when she had to list her criminal history on job applications. She was on probation in 2003 after stealing a car. By 2004, she was cleaning floors in a beauty shop for minimum wage. By September 2005, she returned to her comfort zone.

"I couldn't stay away from cocaine," Gail said. "My probation officer called and asked to see me. When I went there, she pulled my probation and I got the prison time. That's when I was given some resources, including AWEE. I've been off cocaine since then."

Marie Sullivan, the group's president and chief executive officer, said it asks women who are in prison what they want to do when they're released. She said the program received its third year of funding with a renewed U.S. Department of Labor Prisoner Re-entry Initiative grant for fiscal year 2008. The program has achieved a documented recidivism rate of 9percent, about one-seventh of the 67.5 percent national average recently announced by the U.S. Department of Justice.

Since last year, the group has served 1,348 people for re-entry services. Of those, 73.7 percent were women, 26.3 percent men.

"I knew there would be a challenge," Sullivan said. "But, it's not an overly strong concern. We have gained credibility and have a history of getting people into the workplace. It's a matter of showing employers evidence of what we've done. Maybe a firm takes a little bit of a risk hiring someone from us the first time, but they see these employees know they made a mistake and want to do well."

Denise Nowhitney, marketing assistant for Freedom Air Conditioning Plumbing & Heating Inc. of Mesa, said the company has used about a dozen women who were part of the program for its call center. Nowhitney, a former methamphetamine addict who said she never served jail time, can relate to the ex-cons.

"The girls are looking for stable employment," she said. "I understand what they're going through. I never had a program that would help me get a job, give me bus passes so I could get to work and do other things for me. It's a real positive note. These girls are grateful when they come in and most of them show up every day. I feel like we're giving back to the community by giving these people a chance to work and get back into a positive routine. They generally don't let us down."



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