

# Center for Women in Transition Helps Female Ex-Offenders Create Stable, Crime-Free Lives

Imagine that you were raised in a home where your parents neglected you because they were too busy using and dealing drugs. Imagine you have your first drink of alcohol at the age of nine. Imagine quitting school when you were fourteen in order to steal, deal drugs or sell your body to feed your drug habit. Imagine a life of abusive relationships, homelessness and addiction.

This is the life that so many Center for Women in Transition clients lead prior to their incarceration, and it's the life that most of them would return to without the help of the Center. Center for Women in Transition assists female ex-offenders in successfully transitioning back to their families and communities through mentoring, transitional housing, referral services and restorative justice. With the Center's assistance, clients work toward four primary goals: 1) safe housing, 2) employment, 3) sobriety and 4) remaining law-abiding citizens (no recidivism).

For example, Debra started drinking and using drugs at the age of nine, living in a home with a single, alcoholic mother. For the next 33 years, she never kicked the habit. She spent 10 years working the street as a prostitute to feed her addictions. She was arrested for the first time in 1999, and she had been in and out of prison since then.

Last year, Debra became one of the first residents at Schirmer House, one of the Center's transitional housing facilities. She immediately began attending program meetings, including Alcoholics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, anger management and various life skills classes.

After six months in the program, Debra was spending two days a week in treatment and three days volunteering at a neighborhood center. She was working toward her GED and diligently

taking medications that treated her mental health issues. She was playing in a community softball league and gardening. After nine months, she regained custody of her daughter and moved to rural Missouri to take a new job and start a new life for her family. She is employed, sober and thriving.



One of the keys to the Center's success is its one-on-one mentoring program. Clients are matched with a female volunteer mentor who provides guidance and support during this difficult transition. Many clients have lost the support of their family and friends, or they've never had a support system.

For example, Becky struggled with alcohol abuse for over a decade before her first incarceration on DWI charges in late 2006. After her release in spring



of 2007, Becky was re-arrested 19 days later on a 3rd-degree assault charge, an incident that occurred during a relapse, and she went back to prison for another 21 months. When she was released in January 2009, she was accepted into the Center's mentoring program. Most of her family and friends

had lost faith in her, and going home may have meant falling back into old patterns.

"Once I entered the program, everything started falling into place for me," said Becky. "The Center provided me with referrals to substance abuse treatment and employment counseling, bus passes, food cards—everything that I needed. And they gave me a safe, secure apartment to live in."

Becky found a new system of support with Center staff, other program participants and her mentor, Mary. Becky has been working with Mary for 10 months. "It is truly the perfect match. We are both RNs. We both have master's degrees in related fields," said Becky. "I was really blown away at how quickly we hit it off."

With the support of the Center, Becky is actively working to repair fractured relationships with her family, especially her sister, ex-husband and sons. The Center is paying for Becky to attend family counseling with her 20-year-old son.

Today, Becky has over 30 months clean and sober, has found part-time work and got her nursing license reinstated. "I used to say, I just want my life back. But you know what? I don't want my old life back," said Becky. "I'm 52 years old and I get to create a new Becky. That's a gift."

The Center is seeking female volunteer mentors, ages 25 and older, to serve in one-year mentoring partnerships to support women like Debra and Becky. No experience is needed and training is provided. Additional volunteer opportunities are also available, including office and episodic volunteers. For more information about volunteering, contact Erin Whitham at (314)771-5207 or erin@cwitstl.org. You can also support the Center by attending our upcoming spring fundraiser, Beautiful Transformations: Recognition Dinner and Auction, on Friday, March 19, 2010 at Orlando Gardens on Hoffmeister. Tickets are \$65.00 each. For more information, please contact Mallory Rusch at (314)771-5207 or mallory@cwitstl.org.



**Center for Women in Transition**  
**7529 South Broadway**  
**St. Louis, MO 63111**  
**(314)771-5207 (Office)**  
**(314)771-0066 (Fax)**

[www.cwitstl.org](http://www.cwitstl.org)