

Against All Odds



A Collective Endeavor of Women Who Have Experienced Homelessness

Friendship House, Inc., Women's Ministry, 8th & Orange Sts., Wilmington, DE. 652-8033

NO COMFORT

For one entire year of my life I lived in an eight by ten cell that was the epitome of bad interior design. The cinder-block walls were always an arm's length away, painted a horrible shade of yellowish white. I could never quite tell if that was the original color or if it turned that way, like a coffee drinker's teeth. There was a window at the far end of the cell, separated into three skinny panes of plexiglass conspicuously smaller than a human body. The view was framed with layer upon high gloss layer of cracked and peeling leprechaun green paint. But, strangely enough, when I gazed out the window at just the right time of afternoon, golden rays of sun glittered on the razor wire fence just like diamonds set against the cobalt sky. Anything can become art if you look long enough, and I was desperate.

The unit I lived in was minimum security. If maximum security is like a zoo, minimum security is the jungle; the animals are not in cages. We were never actually locked in our cells except at certain head counts and a shift change, and by "locked in," I mean we were essentially trusted not to come

out of our rooms. We lived in what are called pods, twelve cells divided into two tiers behind a giant wall of plexiglass windows. It was like a fish tank, and now I know why fish try to jump out when the lid is open. Relatively speaking, however, it was something of an upper echelon. We mingled freely with the other inmates. We had cell doors that locked from the inside. Our bunks, desks and closets were made of wood and not bolted to the floor. This is a unit where convicts learn to appreciate the value of free-moving furniture. It made it easier to thoroughly clean all the corners and spaces of a cell, which was imperative to warding off the astronomically large spiders that infested the prison. The prison experience just wouldn't be complete without a nasty spider bite and a lifetime of the heebie-jeebies.

I definitely learned to appreciate the little things in life, especially all the little things I wasn't supposed to have. My collection of contraband reflected a slightly higher status than someone who didn't have, say, a set of water color paints, an eye liner, a bottle of perfume, or a needle and thread. These things were like pirate's gold.

The key to keeping contraband is to find innovative ways to hide it. Of course, experience shows that whatever genius idea I devised, someone had already tried it and gotten caught. There were illegal substances taped under the rims of toilets, unspeakably obscene objects hidden inside mattresses, and explicit love letters nestled between the pages of the Bible. Nothing is sacred.

I learned that things are not always what they appear to be, an important example being the phenomenon of state-issued toothpaste. It's a wonderful multi-purpose compound that is good for everything except brushing your teeth. It hangs pictures, cleans sneakers, removes stains, and clears breakouts, but will not freshen breath. I could treat myself to a three minute toothpaste facial, but putting it on my toothbrush would be unacceptable. Anything that was acceptable had to be purchased from commissary. It is impossible to survive prison without commissary. Anything state-issued is so terrible that it's imperative to have some form of income. I had a food service job. I made a whopping eighteen cents an hour dealing out meals

to the inmates on my unit. With this income, I had access to the commissary.

The microcosm of the women's prison is not reality. There will never be a day when the inmates don't hear the buzz of electric-locking doors. An inmate will never simply walk outside on her own volition. Nothing happens without someone pulling strings from above, and simple truth no longer exists. The temperature will never be comfortable. The hot water heater will always break. The uniforms will never fit properly. The contraband will always be found. Newly committed heroin addicts will never stop begging for candy. And every single time an inmate finds some little bit of comfort, it is almost guaranteed to be taken away. Nevertheless, I learned to laugh in the face of all this. Sometimes that was the only thing I had that no one could take from me.

Jennifer W.

Note: Jenn was incarcerated at Baylor Women's Correctional Institution, which is one of the newer and better prisons in the state. She is currently enrolled in college and living in our Women's Housing Program.

HELPING YOURSELF

Hello. I would like to introduce myself. My name is Monica H. I am 30 years old and I have three beautiful children. They are my special angels and they are the reason I work harder and harder each day. I want to stay out of jail and stay drug free with the help of my Holy Father, my three kids, my

family and Friendship House. The staff will definitely help those who are trying to help themselves. Now that I have found a job, I am going to go back to school to get my GED. Education is very, very important to me because I have goals and getting my GED is one of my goals. I don't know about nobody else, but this sister here has a plan and rest assured, I am going to work my plan.

IT'S LOOKING BRIGHTER

My name is Erica C. and my life as a single parent of three children has been hard, at the age of twenty-three. I am currently incarcerated and haven't been able to be the mother I want to be to my children. Sometimes feeling hopeless, but things seem brighter when you meet people who care people who are going through what you are. That's what I have found at the Friendship House - people who care. I go there a lot to get an insight on life, or just a smile with comforting words, and a push to want more and do more. I'm glad I found the Friendship House, it will help me prepare myself for the future and assist me in becoming who I want to be.

ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

My experience at the Friendship House has enhanced every area of my life. Before my placement here at the Day Center, I had no idea who was behind those red doors. Coming

from a two-parent home, I was sheltered from certain realities of life. I never knew there were shelters for those who were homeless. I'd always thought that if you were homeless, you would go to your parent's house or a relative's place. Doing my internship here has allowed me to see life in another perspective. What amazes me about these women, is despite what they are facing, each morning they have enough in them to say hello. I have gained great humility from each of the clients.

The staff members at the Day Center are rare people. I have witnessed so much passion for what they do and it is contagious. They come in day in and day out not knowing what challenge they will be faced with, but they are ever so ready.

Friendship House gives the homeless a second chance at life.

M. S. Floyd

DONATIONS NEEDED

The Women's Center and Women's Housing are in need of some items:

The Women's Center needs personal hygiene items to give away to our clients such as: *soap, shampoo, deodorant, lotion, toothpaste, toothbrushes.* Personal size works best.

The Women's Housing needs cleaning supplies: *laundry detergent, dish soap (both regular and for dishwasher), general household cleaner, bathroom cleaner, scouring pads.*

Anything that you can do to help in either of these areas would be much appreciated.

MOVING TO A NEW CITY

I moved to Wilmington March 13th from New York City. I lived in Harlem and my friends were taking advantage of me in my own apartment - disrespecting me and pulling me down. My kids were growing up too fast and there was too much negativity in the streets. I wanted a slower pace of life for all of us.

My sister in law lives here (down on Rt. 40) and she told me to come down here with my two girls (one is 7 and the other is 10). We couldn't stay with her because there are already too many people in her house, so we moved into a shelter.

My kids are in school here now and they love it. They are meeting all kinds of positive people.

I've worked temporary jobs before; home health aide kind of work and for the city of New York in the Parks Department. Right now I am looking for a job as a cashier. I finished the 11th grade of high school and want to get my GED.

I have been coming to Friendship House Women's Day Center and have gotten help with how to get around on the buses, how to get a state ID, where I can get clothes, and that sort of thing. I've gotten calls back about apartments. I feel good about myself. Every time I succeed at something, I come down to the Women's Center to tell Miss Pam about it. I have also brought some other women from the shelter here to get help.

Tawanna P.

A REPORT FROM THE ROAD

(Note: The author wishes to remain anonymous and wrote this article as if writing about a family member.)

In a recent message from Caroline, we learn that she is in the last phase of her journey through the Friendship House Program and is now searching for an apartment. Having confronted the "terrifying" condition of her homelessness, she entered the Jane Ashford House in January '05. While there, she reports she completed the job training program at the Clothing Bank and found a permanent, full-time position where she has now been employed for a year.

Last June, she goes on to tell us, she moved into an apartment at Palmer House and began a course of psychotherapy specifically to address the issues that had brought her to Friendship House in the first place. Alongside therapy, she has succeeded in addressing her financial problems and has paid off her debt and other bills which accrued during a lengthy period of unemployment. She says saving a significant portion of her income has made this "miracle" possible and the alleviation of this debt has provided very real psychological relief.

Caroline's voice took on an excited tone as she related how she received "the best Valentine's present imaginable!" The "boon" in her life was a car

donated by a charitable organization which has made it far easier for her to get back and forth from work.

It is also making the present search for an apartment easier, she says, but continues, "it's still a real challenge-much like looking for a job...I'm coping daily with the uncertainty of the unknown and disappointment that what I'd really like to have just plain costs too much!" She says the realistic criteria have to be affordability and something she'll find tolerable. "Sure I'd like the wood-burning fireplace and tree-shaded decks," she laments, "but really-when I remember where I'm coming from-a clean, tidy, well-lighted space will work just fine." She adds that she is also sustained by her faith that the appropriate apartment will materialize as she works for it and this keeps her going.

Caroline concluded our conversation on a characteristically philosophical note: "My journey has been an extraordinary one and paradoxically, really about my becoming just an ordinary human being-which I already am, in any case-journeying with other human beings to accomplish sometimes difficult but ultimately rewarding tasks." And finally, "I didn't plan this journey, but I would not have wanted to miss the opportunity to take it for all the world."

We applaud her and eagerly await her arrival home.

*Interested in seeing the
Friendship House
Ministries first hand?
Call Lu Johnston*

at 652-8033
for a tour!

UGLY QUILTS

by Lu Johnston

"Lord, take the work of our hands and bless it, and in thy name, let the person that receives this gift know that he is loved. Amen"

After that simple prayer, the three women around the table gently rolled up a handmade sleeping bag layered with a piece of plastic for groundcover, sweater, hat, socks, this prayer and a book of devotions.

As a staff person at Friendship House, I have given away many of these "Ugly Quilts" but had never been to the source. One recent Wednesday morning recently, I visited a classroom at St. Paul's United Methodist Church on Foulk Road where a group of dedicated women gather to turn donated fabric pieces into a colorful triple layer of warmth for our most needy clients. For 15 years,
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Friendship House have given these quilts to men who will be sleeping on the street, women who have found an abandoned building in which to live, or someone who has an apartment but no bed.

Some of the work on the quilts is done at home, but from September through April, from 9-11:00 on Wednesday mornings, the individual efforts are joined into a final product. The task is simple - tying knots with string through the fabric to hold the layers together - but the end result is profound.

I talk a lot about the efforts that keep Friendship House going. During tours I offer, I tell people about the range of

volunteer opportunities: from hands on working with our clients to less direct offerings.

Both have extreme value in sustaining us and supporting the less fortunate of our area. I have often used the story of the Ugly Quilts as an example of a service that is removed from the walls of our ministries, but has a tangible, direct impact.

If you are interested in helping with this ministry or starting a similar one, feel free to call me at 652-8033 and I will introduce you to the quilters. And, if you happen to be driving by St. Paul's on a Wednesday morning, please offer a prayer of thanks for the work being done inside on our behalf.



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