

Buckner offers haven of hope at housing complex_62804

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By Felicia Fuller

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DALLAS-Like refugees from private wars, one by one they file in, their faces bearing silent witness to atrocities-hollow eyes, missing teeth and conspicuously concealed bruises. For Shirley Harrell, 40, the wounds hide in places only Christ can see.

"I'd been searching to fill an empty space in my heart," she says wistfully. "Later, I found the void was love for myself and the Lord. Now I don't need anyone else to validate me."

Johnny
Flowers,
satellite site
coordinator
for Buckner
Children and
Family
Services,
shares a hug
with brothers
Ishty and
Darius Brown.
Three-year-old
Ishty (left)
and 15-month-
old Darius
(right) reside
at The Parks
at
Wynnewood
in Dallas.
(Felicia Fuller
Photo)

On this day at The Parks at Wynnewood housing complex, Harrell joins eight other women seeking restoration and recovery from domestic violence.

Many are estranged from their abusers, but a few still struggle to break free. All gather for a weekly roundtable to vent their frustrations and craft strategies for personal empowerment. Harrell, by far the most outspoken in the group, has become a matriarch of sorts to the younger women.

Such status has come at a high price. Harrell began selling and using drugs at 13. She dropped out of high school, and by age 18, she was roaming the red-light district in Dallas and exchanging sexual favors for money to support her drug habit.

After a series of incarcerations on drug and forgery charges, she finally achieved sobriety, earned a GED, took college courses and married a longtime companion.

But the security she'd coveted since childhood was short-lived. It wasn't long before her husband was belittling her and cursing her in front of her sons: Dameon, Dominick and Jermale.

"He threatened to throw me through a window," she recalls. "I sent him to jail ... tried to put him out. He set fires in front of my door."

The nadir of her nightmare came Jan. 12, 2000, three days after the couple's first anniversary. In a haze of cocaine and alcohol, Harrell's husband struck her in the back of the head with a golf club. As she lay motionless on the floor, blood pooling around her body, he rummaged through her belongings, grabbed a VCR and fled the scene.

"I knew after the golf club incident that I had to build a better life for my sons," she says. "I knew my boys needed to talk to a man, a strong man, someone who could give them direction."

Enter Johnny Flowers, satellite site coordinator for Buckner Children and Family Services of North Texas, a ministry affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

On any given day, Flowers can be found policing the grounds at The Parks until well past dark-offering advice, praying for the sick and diffusing tensions.

His career with Buckner began at The Parks in 1998, when he was appointed to direct the after-school program at what was then a fledgling extension office. Known as Mr. Johnny to the 195 women and children he serves, this former U.S. Army Ranger serves as a model of manhood in a community where fathers are sadly lacking.

“Johnny is a light. I could feel his spirit from the moment we met,” Harrell recalls.

Harrell credits Flowers for saving her sons Dominick, 19, and Jermale, 18, from “a fate worse than death.” Although they already had arrests for drug possession, Harrell says, they were upping the ante—plotting the revenge-killing of her abusive husband.

“When I got into the program, the one thing I prayed about is for God to take away my shame and embarrassment so I could get help,” she says. “Johnny talked to my boys, and, to this day, they respect him to the utmost.”



Childcare is one of the services made possible at The Parks by a partnership between Buckner and local churches and ministries.

Under the mentorship of Flowers and other Buckner staff, the boys began to turn a corner, becoming active in the Young Men's Mentorship Group and participating in Bible study. Today, Dominick, who struggled for years with undiagnosed dyslexia, is working toward a GED. And Jermale is holding his own as a high school senior. At 24, Dameon is preparing to graduate from Texas A&M UniversityCommerce this summer with a master's degree.

The Harrell family represents many Parks residents who've achieved their own brand of success through Buckner programs.

"We speak life because we know that what you believe, you become," says Theresa Heiskell, a clinical coordinator for The Family Place crisis center, which offers counseling sessions at The Parks through a partnership with Buckner.

Resources available to participants in the domestic violence program include temporary housing, childcare, job skills training, a food pantry and a fund for emergency crisis assistance.

"This is not a cookie-cutter program," says Flowers. "It's a one-stop-shop, total social services network made possible through strategic partnerships."

Among those partners is Concord Missionary Baptist Church in Dallas,

whose officials entered an agreement with Buckner in 2001 to provide expanded social services to the community in a Christian context.

The church regularly commits volunteers and resources, and its members host a summer Bible camp for children 7 to 12 years old.

Its missionary extension, Wynnewood Church, is housed on the property and serves as a refuge for residents needing spiritual intervention. Church services are held on site Sunday mornings.

“For us to address the needs of the people, we must work together as a team,” says Renwick Reid, pastor of Wynnewood Church. As a licensed substance abuse counselor, Reid also assists residents battling addiction.

From the unborn to the elderly, Buckner programs are improving quality of life for residents of this largely African-American community, where the median age is 30 and incomes average \$18,000 annually. The heads of household mainly are single women with little more than a 10th grade education. Most receive government assistance.

Flowers also notes a steady rise in the number of single seniors raising their grandchildren.

“Besides providing a social outlet, we try to bring in speakers and resources that educate them on their rights,” says Flowers. “Perhaps more importantly, we provide a venue for them to talk about their daily stressors.”

Sessions open with prayer, food and fellowship and are followed by group discussions. Topics run the gamut, from overcoming feelings of isolation to finding affordable healthcare.

Participants cite a litany of reasons their children cannot or will not parent-child abuse and neglect, divorce, incarceration and illness, to name

a few. By far the most common reasons are alcoholism and substance abuse.

“I remember the days before Buckner, when nothing was here and kids were just wandering aimlessly,” one participant recalls. “Now they're learning social graces, improving their grades and growing spiritually. The after-school program, especially, has been a godsend.”

Established in 1998, the after-school program has been refined over the years to offer more targeted services. The curriculum comprises homework assistance, spiritual enrichment and therapeutic recreation.

“I'm learning how to be a young lady and how to respect myself and others,” says 11-year-old Katrina Lyons, a sixth-grade honor student at Academy of Dallas. Katrina is a member of Young Successors, a new component of the after-school program that targets girls 9 to 12 years old.

“Thank God for Buckner because it's not just a job; it's a ministry,” says Flowers. “I don't just think of them as clients. I think of them as God's children in need. We don't criticize or judge because, by the time they come to us, they're already at their lowest point.

“We just try to lift them up.”

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