

Abuse victim finds restoration at Buckner Children's Village_30705

March 4, 2005

Posted: 3/4/05

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By Felicia Fuller

Buckner News Service

BEAUMONT-A family member stole her innocence. Her Heavenly Father restored her soul.

"I used to tell myself if I was a child of God, he wouldn't let me go through what I went through," Tiffany said. "But I realized that what I went through was to build my testimony. I am strong. I survived. I am making something of myself."

Though she appears a confident 19-year-old college student today, there was a time when Tiffany-not her real name-could scarcely lift her eyes or speak above a whisper. Her constitution was so fragile and her self-esteem so low, she didn't consider herself worthy to walk among common folk.

Counselor
Tammy
Parsons of
Buckner
Children's
Village in
Beaumont
talks with a
girl who is
overcoming
a history of
abuse.
(Photo by
Felicia
Fuller)

Raped at 6, suicidal at 7, homeless at 8 and snared into prostitution at 9, Tiffany had come to expect the worst from life and from those who claimed to love her.

There was a trusted relative. "I hated him doing that to me. I had that feeling deep inside my heart, and I didn't like it. I felt dirty. I thought for the longest time that I was crazy."

Then a parade of predators followed suit. "By the sixth time, I just gave up," she said shyly.

School was especially difficult, she said. "I was known as the stinky one in class," she recalled. "Someone I thought was my friend told everybody I was molested. I became the outcast."

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For years after her parents divorced and after the family was evicted from

their home, Tiffany, her mother and brother moved repeatedly, sleeping on park benches and in seedy motels—almost any place would do.

Panhandling and prostitution became primary sources of income. Eating scraps of food from dumpsters was commonplace. With all their belongings in storage, the children were left only with what they could carry on their backs.

Tiffany's body still bears the scars of wearing clothes and shoes three sizes too small— double-jointed toes and permanent bruises on her upper thighs.

Despite her horrid experiences, a glimmer of girlishness remains in this young woman forced to grow up far too soon. Her bedroom at Buckner Children's Village in Beaumont is strewn with stuffed animals, frilly pillows and shiny trinkets. Also among the layout is an assortment of Bibles.

“I never had a Bible until I came to Buckner,” she said, displaying a concordance signed and presented by Buckner President Ken Hall as a high school graduation gift.

After being bounced between foster homes, family and friends, Tiffany arrived at Buckner three years ago. Her counselor, Tammy Parsons, remembers her as foul-mouthed and fast on foot.

“She started stealing, skipping school, taking pills and having sex, which are all high-risk behaviors,” Parsons recalled. “She was acting out her emotional stuff. She needed higher structure. Things started getting worse and worse, and that's when she had to go to the residential treatment facility.”

The residential treatment center is a secure building on campus where children with severe behavioral problems are monitored around the clock. Residents adhere to strict schedules from sunrise to sunset. Activities are designed to build discipline, character and spirituality. No one is allowed

outside the center except to attend campus school. Everyone receives weekly individual and group counseling.

“We have a behavior modification system here, which we apply to all of our kids,” Parsons said. “We try to be consistent and fair, and we're very clear about our boundaries and our rules. Many of our kids have no boundaries. They've never been taught respect for self and others. That's their biggest challenge.”

It was Tiffany's biggest challenge, too. “I was laying in my bed thinking, 'I'm locked up, popping pills, having sex, stealing, doing everything I promised myself I'd never do.’”

During her stint in the residential treatment center, with only a Bible and school books as reading materials, Tiffany gave her life to Christ and resolved to break the cycle of dependency and depravity that had become her family mantra. Soon she re-assimilated into the general population at Buckner Children's Village.

“I learned a lot. I learned respect and how to hold myself, take care of myself,” she said. “I wanted to graduate and make something out of myself. I was determined to do that, and I changed.”

In the past several months, Tiffany has required less therapeutic intervention, Parsons noted. She graduated from high school last May and now is a college freshman majoring in child psychology.

Like many young adults, Tiffany has some apprehension about venturing out on her own. But her counselor reminds her Buckner is an ever-present source of help through programs such as Transition to Adult Independent Living. A partnership between Buckner Children & Family Services and the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, TRAIL provides support and promotes self-sufficiency to young people 16 and older who have been in state-sponsored care.

“They can come back to us any time, and we're still there for them,” Parsons said.

Tiffany “has come a long way. As she goes through developmental stages and enters more intimate relationships, some of those old issues might come back up. If she chooses to let it control her life and be the center of her life, then it will be that. But if she chooses to deal with those issues, they won't become as powerful. Over the three years she has been here, those things don't control her.”

Of all the methods Tiffany has tried to purge the pain of her past—pills, sex, even ritualistic cutting—prayer has proved the most potent. Today, she encourages others like her to be victors instead of victims.

“When girls come with their problems, I say, 'Here, read this,'” she said, lifting her Bible. “Romans 10, verses 9 and 10 are for salvation. John 14 and 16 are about asking for the Holy Spirit.

“My favorite book of the Bible is Job because, after all that he went through, he would not curse God. Job lost so much, but he got so much more back. So have I.

“I got my pride back. I got my life back.”

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