

# Grace House takes women from prisons to missions

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SAN ANTONIO—Grace House offers women out of prison a chance to break free from their past and transition into society and a relationship with God.

Billy and Jacqueline Thornton, members of First Baptist Church in Boerne, taught weekly Bible classes at Bexar County Jail about 17 years. But they wanted to do more.

“We began to pray that God would send people across our path,” Thornton said. “And he really did.”



Dana Hill, a former Grace House resident who now attends Southwestern Theological Seminary and works in youth camps through the Go Tell Ministries evangelistic organization, prays with a homeless person under a bridge. (PHOTOS/Courtesy of Grace House)

They saw women who had nowhere to go after leaving jail. Some women were released in the middle of the night. These women did not have a

foundation to build on, Mrs. Thornton said.

She and her husband prayed about the need, and in 2002, they opened Grace House in San Antonio.

“If the Lord was in and wanted it, we would be his hand extended and opened,” she said.

Grace House offers women out of jail or prison a place to go where they can receive room, board, clothes and training to help with everyday life, including spiritual life.

The Thorntons, with volunteers including the Texas Baptist Men Builders, recently completed a \$1 million home paid for through contributions. The new Grace House can hold 12 women, and nine women currently live there.

“We live like a family,” Mrs. Thornton said. “We don’t want to turn it into an institution. It’s an intimate setting.”

The women live there from six months to a year, but one woman felt called to stay.

Emily Williams, now 28 and on staff at Grace House, hit rock bottom when she was 23 years old.

She spent time in jail and struggled with a 10-year drug addiction. She also discovered she had a heart condition caused by her drug use.

“I had no hope, no joy, no reason to live,” Williams said.

She almost wanted to go to jail because she thought she would die if she stayed on the streets.

While in jail, a woman visited her and asked if she wanted to change her life.

“I was so sick and tired of that life,” Williams said. “She said a prayer for me, and I’ve never been the same since.”



Residents and recent graduates of Grace House enjoy a July 4 fellowship meal.

Williams read the Bible while in jail, and God refined her, she said. She went to live at Grace House when she was released.

“Before, I was not in Christ, and my life was nothing,” Williams said. “Now that I’m in Christ, my life is full, meaningful (and) purposeful.”

She has been on staff for two years at Grace House, and she works with women who remind her of her past lifestyle.

“I can say that, ‘Look, I know this is hard, but it can be done,’” Williams said. “I can relate to them.”

For the first six months the women stay in the house, the staff pours the word of God into their lives, Williams said.

“We try to get them to see that God’s way is the only way to make it,” she said. “He’s our number one priority in this life. If we don’t get that, we will stumble and fall.”

After six months, the women can look for employment, start a job and save money for an apartment or a car. Going from jail to the real world can be

more difficult than most realize, she said.

“The world is very overwhelming and influential,” Williams said. “Grace House gives them the opportunity to transition out and not just be thrown out. ... It’s a place for them to receive healing.”

Dana Hill, another former Grace House resident, now attends Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and works in youth camps through Go Tell Ministries, an evangelistic organization.

Hill travels around the United States and will go to the Dominican Republic later this year, Mrs. Thornton said.

“She felt a call in her life,” Mrs. Thornton said. “She found the Lord Jesus, and it transformed her life, like the Bible said it would. She became a new creation.”

The Thorntons want to help any woman with a problem. Grace House offers nutrition courses, classes on anger management, exercise classes and parenting classes, but all these activities have a focus on God.

“Everything we do is founded on the word of God,” Mrs. Thornton said. “That’s our purpose. That’s what changes lives.”

Out of the 60 women who have lived in the house, only two have gone back to prison.

Six women currently attend college after finishing Grace House’s program, and many receive scholarships through contributions and grants, Thornton said.

“I see them go from darkness to light,” he said.

For more information on Grace House, contact Jacqueline Thornton at (830) 537-4333 or Cathe Graves at (210) 493-7884.

