

# A little encouragement

The Family Effect's efforts help moms beat addiction — and keeps families together

Story by Chris Worthy \* Photos by Cindy Hosea

There are tears and hugs too numerous to mention. Words of encouragement, congratulations and caution are woven together in a way that can only come from the voices of experience. Prayers of protection and gratitude are offered, followed by a lone voice singing "Amazing Grace."

Graduation day at Serenity Place, the women's residential treatment center of The Phoenix Center in Greenville, is both a final step and a first step. After six months of building a new life, the graduate ventures outside the protective bubble of counselors, peer support and an unseen safety net that stops addiction and desperation at the door. She has been given tools to overcome her old life and the means to resist a relapse into a grave, life-threatening sickness. Her children have been given the chance for a safe, warm environment with the rock solid stability of a village that takes on their care when their mother is unable to do it alone.

The Family Effect is the philanthropic arm of The Phoenix Center. While The Phoenix Center's existence is state-mandated, funding is an ever-present problem, said Kelly Byers, the organization's community engagement coordinator.

"In 2008, they cut the budget by almost \$1 million, but the number of people we treat has gone up," Byers said. "The Family Effect started in 2009 to bridge that gap. Our sole purpose is to recruit volunteers and raise funds for family-based Phoenix Center programs."

Serenity Place is only one of the center's



Angie Crawford shows off some of the encouraging letters she has received from children who have participated in the programs at Serenity Place.



programs, but it is highly unusual. It offers women a full six months to come out of addiction and into recovery and it also allows them to keep their preschool-aged children with them. One year after leaving treatment, 85 percent of Serenity Place's graduates remain clean and sober.

"Only 3 percent of the treatment facilities in the country allow you to bring your children with you," Byers said, although those centers boast a much higher success rate than those that require mothers to leave their children behind.

Angie Crawford speaks from experience. As a peer support coordinator at The Phoenix Center, she helps others who are taking the journey she walked eight years ago as a resident of Serenity Place. At the time, her son was 2 years old and her baby daughter was just 7 months old.

"I was resistant about going, but it was either that or jail," Crawford said. "When I found I could take them, it gave me a ray of hope. It was a huge motivation."

Serenity Place helped Crawford get a fresh start, free of addiction. But it also played an important role in the lives of her children.

"She learned to walk there and cut her first tooth there," Crawford said of her daughter. "(My son) learned his ABCs there. When we came out, we came out a whole new family. They don't know a life of addiction. They only know a life of recovery."

At Serenity Place, moms work on their addictions. They also learn such life skills as personal hygiene and how to balance a checkbook, work on educational goals, and take classes on parenting skills, cooking and more. Staff members work with children on emotional development and any developmental delays that may exist due to their mother's drug use.

"For infants, it's more physical," Byers said. "For our older children, it's developmental. They don't know what books are."

While most have not been abused, Byers said great strides are needed to get the children developmentally ready to start school on time.

The Family Effect's reach also includes White Horse Academy, a treatment center for boys ages 13 – 17, which offers adventure-based and traditional counseling, and prevention services that include underage drinking enforcement, a program for at-risk youth and community activities.

"We are about making families strong for themselves and for the community," Byers said.



## Belinda's story

Seven years ago, Belinda Wilson was all but invisible to the world around her. Now, her voice resonates through the hearts of women who yearn for a new life for themselves and for their children.

"I went into Serenity Place with my daughter and graduated from there in 2005," Wilson said.

At the time, Wilson's daughter was just a toddler.

"She's 10 now," Wilson said. "She's a great violinist. She's on A/B Honor Roll."

Wilson was already in active addiction when she became pregnant with her daughter.

"I was a chronic drug user," she said. "I nearly lost my daughter to DSS."

For Wilson, rock bottom was a long way down. She wasn't a hard-luck story, saddled with generational drugs and poverty.

"Before I started using drugs, I was a college grad, a music teacher, a beauty queen," she said.

For a time, she thought her life was wasted.

"I was living on the street, soup kitchens, homeless shelters, prostituting when needed," she said. "And that was right here on the streets of Greenville. That was my life."

Wilson was forced to make a choice: get help or die.

"I sat behind a dumpster in downtown Greenville, just strung out," she said. "I thought, 'This is it. I could walk in the street and no one would have to worry about me.' I stood up and the sun came out. That was the hope I needed."

Serenity Place wasn't Wilson's first attempt at getting clean, but it was the first time she could have her daughter with her and participate in a six-month program.

"If I couldn't have taken her, I would probably still be seeking help," she said. "No one deserves to suffer in the way that I did."

Wilson got clean, got treatment for her underlying depression and got on the road to a new life. Following her graduation from Serenity Place, she participated in intensive outpatient treatment at The Phoenix Center.

"I realized I still have value," she said. "Today, I can say I'm healthy. I'm a mother. I am a part of the community. God has given me my life back. I can't tell you how grateful I am."



Belinda Wilson speaks during the Family Effect's Transformation Breakfast in May. "The longer I stay in recovery, the longer the negative consequences don't look as bad to society," she says. "Give yourself a chance. It's not easy. People will work along with you, but the hard part comes from within." COURTESY PHOTO

But the gratitude spills out in her contagious laugh and unbridled joy. Wilson is returning what was given to her tenfold as she serves as a volunteer with The Family Effect.

"The biggest fear for women is leaving their children to get treatment," she said. "Knowing how to recover with my daughter was a milestone for me. At Serenity Place, I learned the skills of being a mother again."

Now, Wilson is married — "united together as a family," she said — involved in church, leading a Bible study for the current residents of Serenity Place and buying a home.

"I am just grateful that I was given an opportunity to allow my physical body to heal through treatment," she said. "That's what The Family Effect did for me. It made me aware of why things happen and how I respond. I was given the tools to solve problems, to wait things out, to weigh the benefit. I didn't know that I didn't know

that."

The life change was abrupt and complete.

"I had to disassociate with everything that resembled that old life," Wilson said. "I had to work on the life I always dreamed of and that I saw other people living. I saw people living their calling and I was stuck in bondage."

While she consistently gives back to others who follow behind her, Wilson said she can never erase the damage her addiction caused.

"I will be dealing with the circumstances and some of the consequences for the rest of my life," she said. "The longer I stay in recovery, the longer the negative consequences don't look as bad to society. I continue to maintain my support system and my accountability. If it's out there to have, I believe I have the opportunity to go for it. Give yourself a chance. It's not easy. People will work along with you, but the hard part comes from within."



## Denise's story

When Denise Gambrell's child was taken from her because of her addiction to crack cocaine, it seemed like the end of the world — until things got worse. Now, Gambrell not only celebrates her second chance at motherhood, she is rescuing children who need help.

"I lost custody of a child in 1991," Gambrell said. "My parental rights were terminated because I didn't stop using."

In late 1998 — still addicted to drugs — Gambrell was five months pregnant.

"I was homeless, literally living in a crack house," she said.

Gambrell said it was the height of the time when pregnant women were being arrested for drug use and she feared what would happen to her and her unborn child. Mustering all the courage she could, Gambrell asked for help.

"I told my OB/GYN I was still using," she said. "The social worker at the OB/GYN clinic told me about Serenity Place. I got clean Nov. 29, 1998."

The father of Gambrell's baby entered treatment several weeks later. Though the two are no longer a couple, they remain connected through their daughter.

"She saved two people's lives," Gambrell said of the social worker. "He had been using for 35 years."

The counselors at Serenity Place gave Gambrell a new perspective.

"It was the first time that I heard I was a sick person trying to get better, not a bad person trying to be good," she said. "It's important to understand we're just trying to get better."

Overcoming addiction is not about willpower, Gambrell said. She is now a certified addictions counselor at The Phoenix Center.

"Time is so valuable when you need to rebuild and change your way of thinking," she said. "So many people want to get clean and sober but they don't know how. With six months, you've got time to work with that guilt and shame and work with



Denise Gambrell works in her office at The Phoenix Center. Once a crack cocaine addict, she is now a certified addictions counselor.

those issues that may have led to addiction — the traumas we medicated and didn't face. Like they taught me, alcohol and drugs are just a symptom of the larger problems."

When families collapse, the effect reaches far beyond their homes.

"Somewhere in your life, there has been an impact of addiction or you have seen it," Gambrell said. "The people who can help need to know it can be prevented. Most of

the children in DSS custody are there as a direct result of addiction. The Family Effect brings the means to prevent the collapse of the family unit."

The Family Effect gave Gambrell the means to heal other families and redeem the pain she experienced.

"God is an awesome God," she said. "Today, I'm a foster parent and children are placed in my home. My addiction will not be in vain."

## How you can help

The Family Effect needs volunteers to help with child care during day and evening hours and to help with special events such as holi-

day activities, dinners and more. Volunteers are needed to share skills with mothers in treatment. Material needs include diapers, wipes, baby food, maternity clothes and toys,

books, and art supplies for children. Financial support is always needed. For more information, visit [www.familyeffect.org](http://www.familyeffect.org).