

Step away from giving up,' parolee finds hope

By LINDA BRYANT
Staff Writer

Chanda Williams had two days to find a job or face the possibility of going back to prison.



MICHELLE LORD / STAFF

Chanda Williams, 20, who was convicted of voluntary manslaughter, a felony, when she was 14, now dreams of a future that includes going to school, publishing books of poetry and becoming a child psychologist.

The conditions of her parole stated that Williams, 20, had to have a job within 30 days of being released from the Tennessee State Women's Prison in Memphis.

She says she searched and searched but nobody was willing to stand behind her. Her sentence, which began when she was 14, was for voluntary manslaughter.

The story of Williams' imprisonment — which involves a confused young adolescent trying to protect a family riddled with dark secrets — is heart-wrenching and belies the soft openness of her face.

It was a story no employer wanted to hear because of two words: felony conviction. At the last possible moment, Williams remembered a promise she had received from Project Success three years after completing the youth rehabilitation program when she was still behind bars.

The promise was to help her, if she was willing to help herself. She mustered the courage and knocked on the door of Project Return, a local nonprofit agency that works to stabilize the lives of ex-offenders and sponsors Project Success. It was 4 p.m.

As soon as Williams entered the small agency on Division Street, things started to happen fast. A positive sequence of events unfolded that stunned Williams and the entire staff and board of directors at Project Return.

By early evening she was addressing the agency's board of directors in a meeting, telling her story. By the next morning she was standing in front of dozens of local dignitaries and business leaders, including Metro Police Chief Emmett Turner, at the Millennium Maxwell House hotel.

She spoke directly, and from her heart, about the tough task of returning to society. About the relief and joy of finding people who would stand behind her.

"There wasn't a dry eye in the house," said Don Weidknecht, general manager of FoodStaff, a hospitality employment agency.

Weidknecht, who is also a board member of Project Return, got Williams a job at a temp agency. It was a dramatic achievement because there were only a few hours to spare if she was to remain in compliance with her parole conditions.

Weidknecht wasn't the only person offering Williams support. After her speech at the hotel, 20 people came up to offer her a job.

"Everybody embraced this kid," said Bobby Daniels, director of development and communications for Project Return. "This child stood up and blew the room away."

"I was a step away from giving up," Williams said of her job search. "I have been rejected by so many people. There is nothing worse than a feeling of rejection."

Finally landing a job and finding people who wanted to support her had the effect of melting the frozen feelings inside her, Williams said.

"I cried all the way home on Tuesday night." She admits she's been crying off and on for days. "They are happy tears."

Williams wants to put her past behind her. She dreams of a future that includes going to school, publishing books of poetry and becoming a child psychologist.

"I want to help kids," she said. "I'd like to open up a place, like Project Return, where they can go and know there are people who will stick to their word."

"Not having a job is my greatest fear," she said. "I like to work. I am a hard worker." Job placement is a major focus of Project Return's outreach and training programs.

"About 97% of those that go in end up coming out," Weidknecht said. "Why not help them be successful? We want people to know that when all things fail, there are still some people that will be there."

Although not all ex-prisoners who use the program end up as success stories, Daniels said, many do. One of his favorite sayings, he said, is from a gospel song.

"For a saint is but a sinner, who fell down, but he got up."

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