

THOUGHT
FOR TODAY"Life is not a matter of milestones,
but of moments."Rose Fitzgerald Kennedy
(1890-1992)

House of Hope fosters sobriety and renewal

For Kelly, standing on the dock at Torrance Superior Court six years ago, it was either the van ride to rehab or jail.

"But I already had my plan. I was going to jump and run at the first stoplight," she said from the sheltering confines of San Pedro's nonprofit House of Hope. "I'd already been in and out of jail and in 16 different rehabs and I just knew one more wasn't going to make a difference."

Superficially, Kelly's disease was crack cocaine. Beneath that, it was her entire life. Same as the majority of women who come to this 56-year-old, 56-bed, rarely-heard-of collection of beautifully restored antique bungalows and converted storefronts on West Ninth Street, it was a combination of poor self-esteem, abuse and lives bent out of shape by poverty.

And if such women lived or died, costing society a small fortune as they collapsed, it was nobody's lookout. Except, that is, for the few who care. And, in this case, those who care are usually those who have been there themselves.

"The van driver who came for me was big, real big, and she had been in prison for 18 years. And right off I knew that she was different," said Kelly, who wears her black hair in a stylish blend of curls and ringlets with sharply shaved edges and sides. "I also had the feeling that she would chase my ass down and bring me in."

It was a life-altering moment full of small kindnesses quickly building one upon the other. Kelly didn't know that her court-appointed lawyer had given the House of Hope driver \$40 of her own money.

"She told the woman, 'Do not put this money in Kelly's hands,'" she recalls. "The money was for me, for rehab incidentals and here I was planning to run. Then we picked up some House of Hope alumni on the way down and suddenly I had a car full of sisters like I never had before."

"In other places, all kinds of unethical things went on, drugs were sold, that sort of thing. Here it was zero-tolerance for staff and patients. It was a family and there was structure. And I had to learn everything, how to follow directions, how to live with curfews, all that."

That being the slow climb up through a six-month, seven-day-a-week residential care program. It's a regular emotional boot camp for women ages 18 through 65 who will journey through the facility, moving



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from dormitory life in the unlocked compound's large central house to sober living and independent living in one of the surrounding, 95-year-old craftsman bungalows that once served as homes for unwed mothers.

Bobbi Tschirgi, the executive director, said that 95 percent of the women who come here (many of them under Proposition 36) finish the program. With four months being the minimum stay before taking part in what is always an emotional graduation ceremony.

Which has less to do with time put in and all to do with the family counseling, the reuniting with children (80 percent of the women are mothers) and the joy that comes with that reunion and with seeing mommy sober.

And coming to a place where nearly all the counselors and staff are graduates or in recovery themselves means playing to an audience (a buggy, hand-holding one) that knows every line in the substance abuser's trick book.

The 56 women in residence, said Tschirgi of Rancho Palos Verdes, come from across the social spectrum.

"We have women from The Hill and women from the courts with one thing in common. They are all bottom drunks or drug users. Nearly all are abused in some way or in every way, which means a lot of counseling."

And all for around \$4,500 a month. Which is a life-saving bargain for the women, most of whom pay nothing, and just a big old bargain in general when compared with the \$27,000 per month charged at Betty Ford's or the \$44,000

monthly cost at Eric Clapton's Antigua rehab facility.

The plan from the start was to help the most needy among us. Learning to live substance-free while attending classes and trying to graduate to a regular job was what came to the mind of the late Gloria McKee when — 55 years ago — she nearly killed herself by drinking cleaning fluid that she mistook for booze.

It was a promise to her higher power. Spare me and I will help others. Which she did with the ongoing help of the Las Esperanzas Ladies Auxiliary and an ever-growing alumni association.

It's a sisterhood thing, that much is apparent as I walked the beautifully tended space with Tschirgi and board member Donna Russell, a 24-year volunteer. Together, they outlined their needs.

For starters they need new sofas for the main meeting room. They also need volunteers and a professional marketer/fundraiser. And they need money.

Checks can be sent to House of Hope, 235 W. Ninth St., San Pedro, CA 90733-0921. To volunteer, call 310-521-9209 or e-mail Tschirgi at bobbi@houseofhopesp.org. For more information, visit www.houseofhopesp.org.

Better yet, meet Stacy, a bright-eyed, blond, 37-year-old mom and recovering addict who now works in the front office.

She is a program alumna who arrived here expecting nothing and finding everything.

"I had been in 10 rehabs. But this was different. It's a house, not a hospital, and since everybody here is in recovery, everybody is working the program. There's a lot of spiritual growth and a lot of helping the next group coming in. If you don't do recovery perfectly, the idea is to give back perfectly."

And here, to me, was the tragic part. While I could see the beauty and obvious worth of this woman — and all the others I met here on Thursday morning — she could not. Not then.

"I was never good at anything growing up," said Stacy, who is now considering nursing school. "I never had a good career or money. I just never knew what I was good at."

Until she came here and discovered that being sober and just being beautiful Stacy, a woman with a future, was more than good enough.

I want to hear your comments. Connect with me at john.bogert@daillybreeze.com.