

## Our New Beginning's Carole Pope

*In Our New Beginning house, women are treated as humans and expected to function. They will get jobs, counseling and will learn to deal with their inappropriate behavior. The alternative is prison.*

BY CELIA FLOREN

**T**hirty-two days. That's the average time in the State Penitentiary for people convicted of property crimes. Due to the overcrowding, prisons are not a deterrent, but warehouses. Shuffle them in. Shuffle them out. Without rehabilitation, ex-cons hit the street no better prepared to deal with the world. What society gets is a hard core population of men and women that just get recycled through the

### Profile

system again and again. Until they give it up or until they die.

Carole Pope, recently elected to the Lesbian Community Project's Board of Directors, has been there and is working hard to break that cycle. As an ex-convict and the director of Our New Beginnings, a residential alternative to prison for women, Carole joins the Board in hopes of building bridges between gay ex-cons and the rest of the lesbian community. At a time when the gay population in prison is rising, it is essential for the community to address these issues.

Our New Beginnings was a dream born in prison. Carole Pope had been sent back to prison in part because her parole officer disapproved of her lesbianism. Back in prison, Carole was so angry she refused parole. Instead she got involved in the fight to allow paralegals access to the courts and Carole became the first paralegal in prison. What she learned from the experience was that there was a pattern of women recidivists (repeat offenders). Women were re-offending because there were no programs or support to help them stay out of prison. Carole and six other inmates started a support group, Our New Beginnings, behind prison walls. When Carole accepted parole a year later, she took the program with her.

Out of prison, Carole began the long process of generating support from judges, parole officers and city councilors for Our New Beginnings. In the meantime she had to support herself. Katherine English, then an attorney, hired Carole as a paralegal sight unseen. This was the beginning of a long and deep friendship between the two women. "If Katherine hadn't given me a chance, I don't know what I would have done," Carole admits. Eighteen months later, Our New Beginnings opened a residence in Northeast Portland with a handful of money from local government and a grant application to the Fred Meyer Charitable Trust. "The grant was so crude, it had to be totally rewritten," Carole remembers; "Fred Meyer bought a dream." The \$47,000 grant enabled Carole to finally draw a salary, and with a Community Service worker and a former guard from the penitentiary, Our New Beginnings began to develop a framework for operations. But they were breaking ground all the way.

The direction and purpose of Our New Beginnings has changed over the years. It

originally was intended as a support mechanism for women coming out of prison, a place where there were other women with similar experiences who could help each other learn the skills necessary to stay out. One of the reasons that this idea didn't happen was that too many of the ex-cons wanted Our New Beginnings to help them beat the system, to cover for them. When, instead, Carole would call the police or their parole officers when they screwed up, these women figured Carole was just another kind of cop.

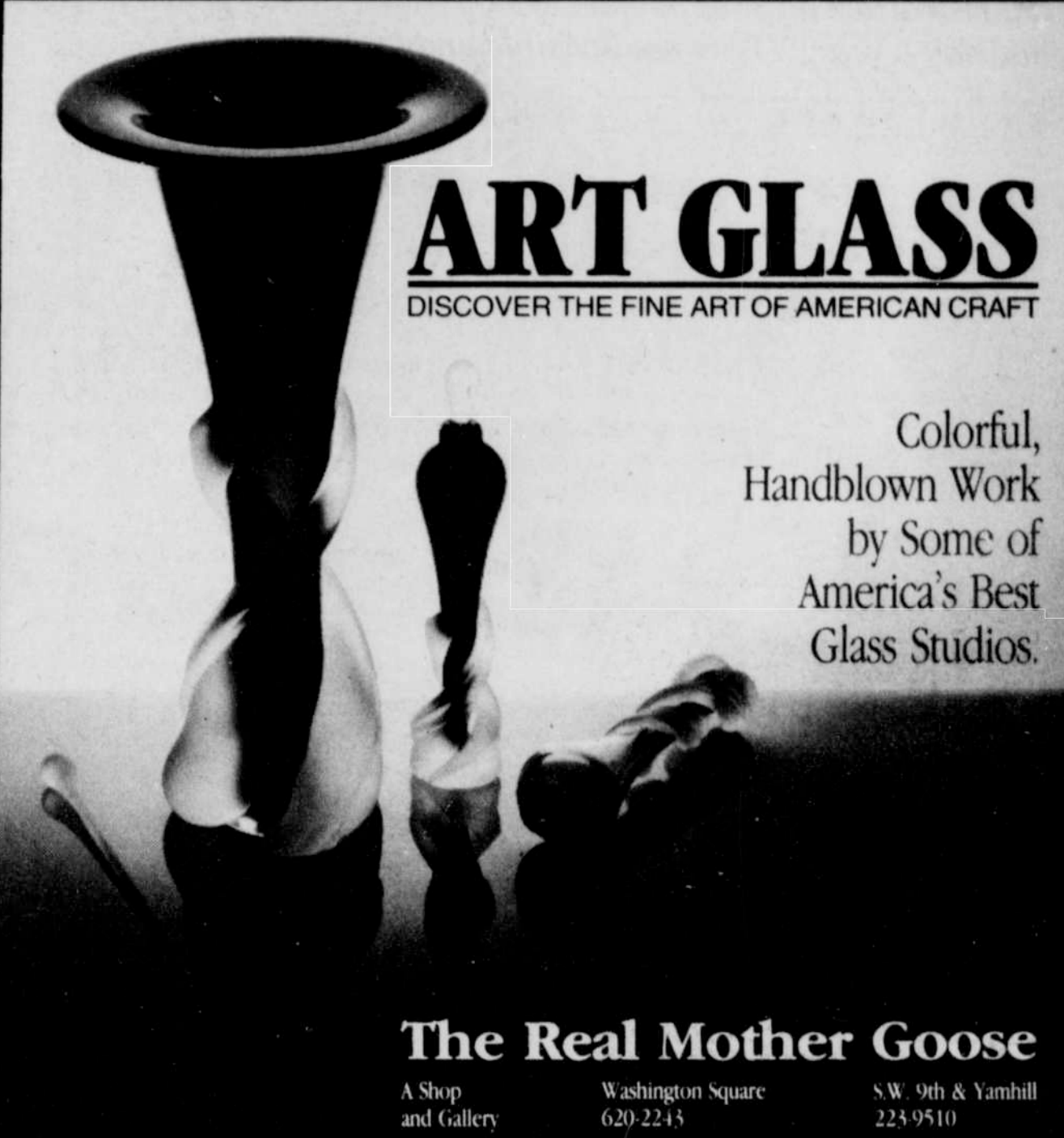
To survive, Our New Beginnings changed its focus and became a place for women one step this side of prison. It receives clients from the Council for Prostitution Alternatives and other women sentenced there by the courts. With seven paid staff, including three former residents, the caseload ranges from 90-130 with a current in-house population of 19 women and three babies, and dogs, cats and goldfish. "Basically, I run a jail for the Sheriff," Carole says. If women escape from the house, now located in Northwest Portland, they'd get five years in the State Pen, just as if they'd escaped from the Justice Center. The difference is that in the Our New Beginnings house, women are treated as humans and are expected to function. That means they will get jobs; they will get counseling; they will learn to deal with their inappropriate behavior. The alternative is prison.

Women sent to Our New Beginnings are often apprehensive and resistant. Carole has a well-deserved reputation as a tough, no-bullshit woman. She expects the women to deal with her honestly and responsibly. This can be frightening if you've never been taught the skills to take care of yourself. Our New Beginnings is essentially a self-help program and for seventy-two percent of the women — it works.

Our New Beginnings is a very structured society within which the residents are expected to function. There are meals together, and chores, counseling and classes. Drug counseling is a fundamental part of Our New Beginnings since the percentage of addicts in the house has risen from 43% to nearly 100%. Almost as many women are victims of incest or abuse. Sandy Frieland is the drug counselor on staff and Patt Chance provides mental health counseling for the women at Our New Beginnings. Other classes teach job skills and living skills. Currently the women are being counseled to prepare themselves emotionally for AIDS testing. With clients in two of the high risk groups — IV drug users and prostitutes — Our New Beginnings is on the front lines of the AIDS crisis.

*Celia Floren's profile on Carole Pope will conclude in the August issue of Just Out.*

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**Sunday, August 9, 1987**

Registration begins at 10 a.m. — Start time: Noon

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