

Our New Beginnings benefit set

A concert by Lucie Blue Tremblay is one effort to advance the word — and the finances — of the alternative program

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

Women come through the doors of the big Victorian house on Hoyt Street because it is their last, best hope. Maybe they've done some time in prison — or maybe a judge sentences them here instead. Probably they have a couple of kids, an addiction to heroin or cocaine, a history of abuse and few job skills.

Six months or so later, 64 percent of them will walk out the doors of Our New Beginnings with the tools to live outside the correctional system.

The problem began behind bars. In 1980, Carole Pope, now the executive director of Our New Beginnings, was in the Oregon Women's Correctional Center for forgery and theft. For four years she had been inmate #39960, a number and a crime. She and some friends brainstormed a program that would help women like themselves cross the gulf between incarceration and independence, a program that would give them skills and self-esteem.

Since the program began in 1981, it has served more than 1,000 women, providing housing, food, child care and parenting classes, job placement, drug counseling and education.

While its residents struggle against their own histories of crime, violence, abuse and addiction, Pope struggles to change the community's views of ex-offenders. A November 25 benefit concert by Lucie Blue Tremblay is one effort to advance the word — and the finances — of the program.

Tremblay, a native of Quebec who sings in French and English, will spend several days at Our New Beginnings' 44-room Northwest residence when she comes to town for the concert.

To date, the program's budget has come primarily from Multnomah County contracts, Oregon Children's Services Division contracts, and grants; the agency has shied away from splashy fundraising events.

"We're not a popular commodity," says Pope. "People don't like crooks. In doing this, it's important for us to establish that there's some positiveness about what's going on here."

Pope hopes the concert will be one way to bridge gaps of mistrust and misunderstanding between residents and the community, including the gay and lesbian community.

"I have gay women here who need positive role models," she explained. "And there aren't any stepping forward. We need to help our own. We can't exclude our own because we're uncomfortable or it's socially unacceptable."

In recent years, Our New Beginnings has begun to gain a high profile in Portland and the nation. In May the agency bought its 80-year-old building, assisted by a \$160,000 grant from the Fred Meyer Charitable Trust. A production company is considering doing a Hallmark television special about Pope and the program. And Newsweek named Pope one of its unsung heroes in the July 4, 1988 issue.

The publicity seems to both flatter and bemuse Pope, a no-nonsense woman with a blunt style and a voice sandpapered by years of smoking Winstons. Her office at Our New Beginnings is a clutter of framed awards, photos of babies born to residents and objects in her favorite shade of purple. An aquarium bubbles in the background, near the bookcase holding copies of Black's Law Dictionary and Criminal Constitutional Procedure.

Sitting back in her chair, shell-pink sneakers propped on the desk, Pope recalls how she pieced her identity back together after being released from prison in 1981. A self-described "scruffy ex-con," she is also a recovering alcoholic and the child of a severely dysfunctional family. Shortly after her release, several women in the community took huge risks and offered Pope a job and a place to live. She did not disappoint them.

"People have to understand that it's a risk for women to come in here and get clear and face all the pain and get their lives together. Then to go out and be tuned down time after time for jobs and apartments gives them the message that 'You're no good.' Then they think, 'Why the fuck bother?' and they go out and get loaded. And society says, 'See?'"

Some women come to Our New Beginnings on their way out of prison; some come as a condition of probation. Others are sentenced to the program as an alternative to jail. In all cases, the program aims to intervene in a cycle of violence, lack of education, drug use and low self-esteem that tends to keep women spinning through the correctional system.

Women residents, 70 percent of whom have at least one child, participate in weekly parent education groups. They also attend weekly counseling appointments, job training programs, Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings and groups on nutrition, stress reduction and AIDS education.

And Pope encourages them to learn trust — of themselves, of each other and of the wider community.

"We're sort of like the last gas station before the desert," she says. "I can't fix anybody. The best thing I can do is interrupt the cycle, teach them another way to live."



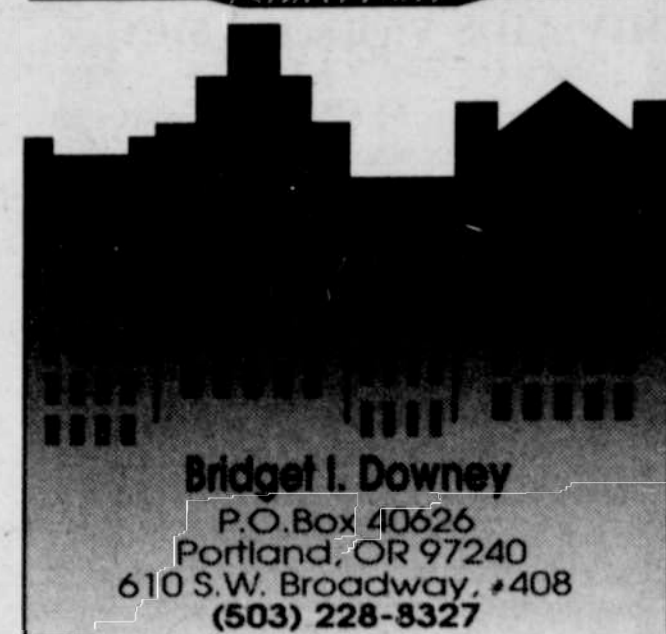
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