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Commentary

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A haven for women, no questions asked

Ozetta Harris abused her liver so much that it started giving out in 2006. She resigned herself to an early death.

"My plan was to die a happy alcoholic," she says.

Now that ending's been rewritten. Ever since getting clean and then receiving a last-minute liver transplant in 2010, she has been on a mission to repay God for giving her a second chance.

I met Harris not long after her transplant when she told me that, at age 53, she was thinking of volunteering to help girls whose mothers were alcoholics or addicts. She got my attention when I heard her say this:

"I would have been a candidate for that guy," she said of serial killer Anthony Sowell. "If he had promised me some crack, I would have followed him into that house. I'd have even told him to hurry up, 'you taking too long.'"

"You do a lot of stuff out of loneliness and despair. Alcohol and drugs were a way out."

These were words I didn't expect from a beautiful, elegantly attired woman who, I noticed, makes music when she walks. Every day, she wears carved brass and wooden bracelets that jingle when she moves.

That day, I wrote down three things. Her name. Her number. And the name of her church, because she wouldn't stop talking about it. Harris gives Calvary Hill Missionary Baptist Church on Cleveland's East Side all the credit for her transformation. "I don't need a way out now. I have God. His promise has given me hope," she said.

A few months later, I found myself searching for that slip of paper and inviting Harris to attend a luncheon with me. It was a fundraiser to build a "safe house" for addicted women, put on by Cuyahoga County's Alcohol, Drug Addiction and Mental Health Services board.

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The project, to be called Seasons of Hope, was conceived to keep a tragedy like the Imperial Avenue murders from happening again.

I wanted her opinion on whether the idea — to provide a homey drop-in center for hard-to-reach women who aren't ready for rehab — was a sound one.

She wasn't just enthusiastic about it. She was raring to go.

"It's a great idea — someplace to hang out, change clothes, take a shower, get food," she told me.

"Would I have been likely to go there if I knew no one was going to grill or drill me? Sure," she said. "You'd rather just be with the people who's not going to talk down to you," she explained.

For Harris, showing some no-questions-asked love to addicted women was a caring way for our city to declare that we value their lives.

After a drug binge, "somebody you may know or may not know says you can stay here for a couple hours, but you have to have sex with me, or do this or that. I'm not the only one who did it just to get some sleep," she told me that day.

"A lot of women don't want to do the things they do. I'm serious. I remember doing some things where it turned my stomach and made me feel so ugly and low," Harris said.

That was the start of her relationship with Seasons of Hope. She joined its advisory board, offering feedback on issues like the layout of the house and the design of an information card. Today, she keeps a pack of those cards in her purse so she can spread the word.

"She has really taken this on as a passion. She's come to every Seasons of Hope meeting. She's been dedicated," said Cindy Chaytor, clinical director at Hitchcock Center for Women, the treatment program that operates Seasons of Hope. "She has good ideas."

After two years of planning,

Seasons of Hope finally opened last summer, in a two-story house near Superior Avenue donated by Third Federal Savings and Loan.

It's had a bare-bones look since the doors opened. But last month, Harris helped change that. She asked her church to take part in a housewarming shower.

The director of missions, Brenda Paschal, showed up with an \$800 check and \$100 in gift cards. "This was just the first installment. We have adopted them," said Paschal, who has joined the advisory board, too.

Now the staff can go wish-list shopping. "We're going to buy curtains, and pictures for the walls," Chaytor said.

"We're going to buy some furniture for the serenity room and pillows and lights so that the room conveys peace and calmness."

She added that Harris could have given no greater gift than to bring her church aboard. "Seasons belongs to the community," and the community must embrace it, Chaytor said.

About 180 women have dropped in so far. Some signed up for treatment but promptly dropped out.

"It's not an overnight process," Chaytor said. "As you talk to them and develop that relationship, they may see the benefit of getting off the streets for good."

To Harris, it just feels good to be part of something that's reaching into the streets. "This is going to save some mothers and some children from a lot of tears. Because it was a lot of tears when those girls came up dead" on Imperial Avenue, she said.

"That crack is something else. You'll do it even when you don't want to. That's when it gets miserable," she told me. "I am so thankful to God for pulling me out."

Years earlier, she thought her life story was over. But now, she's tacking on a whole new chapter.

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