CARNENE GAY: A Safe Place for Healing and a New Life

My name is Carnene Gay and, as a victim of domestic violence, I was ready to fight when I came to the Rescue Mission of Salt Lake. I figured all the other people at the Rescue Mission’s Women’s Facility would be as mean, nasty and scared as I had learned to be. But when I entered the New Life Program on Oct. 2, 2013, I was surprised.

Finally Safe

It wasn’t anything like the warzone I had come to expect in places I lived. Instead, it was peaceful and serene, and I finally felt safe. I started sleeping at night—something I hadn’t done in years—and I started to feel less scared.

Still, I had issues. When I first arrived, hoarded food. I would slip a slice of bread into my pocket or wait until everyone was asleep to sneak food from the refrigerator. I was used to being hungry and not having enough to eat, so I felt like I needed to save food, just in case. But gradually I started to trust that all my needs—including food—would be taken care of.

For the first few weeks, I thought everyone was a bunch of Bible-thumping hypocrites. I knew they were sinners, just like I was, but they were always walking around, saying “the Bible this, the Bible that” or “God this and God that.”

But a funny thing happened. About two months after coming to the Rescue Mission, I started appreciating the Bible. While I initially thought our Bible studies were way too long, I became disappointed when they ended. I wanted them to go longer.

I started really believing in God and that the Bible could help me stay sober. I realized that you didn’t need to be perfect to talk about the Bible or study it. Instead, these were the words you needed if you wanted to change your life.

About that same time, I began to feel that I had a voice. Being in an abusive relationship for so long, I felt like my opinions, feelings and thoughts didn’t matter. But at the Rescue Mission, people were interested in what I had to say. The sessions I had with my counselor, Cyndi Harris, might have been the toughest part of the New Life Program, but I realized they were the words you needed if you wanted to change your life.

In just 18 months, Carnene Gay has broken free from a life of abuse, has found a relationship with God and has begun work at a good job.
Just Get a Job?

“Just get a job.” I think this is the normal reaction people have when they see a homeless person. “Why doesn’t that person quit being lazy and support themselves?” At times, it’s maddening to people. I understand the sentiment and assure you that this is our goal as well: that people can and would support themselves.

But here’s why it’s just not that easy. To become homeless on the streets in the first place, you have to have a lot of things go wrong in life. Most of us, if given the same life experience as our homeless friends, would likely end up homeless ourselves. Many homeless people suffer from low education, lack self-confidence, have limited life and computer skills, struggle with writing and spelling or have other limited abilities.

Often, people who are just trying to get by and then a traumatic event happens—a loved one dies, a car breaks down so they lose their job, they get sick, they become a victim of crime—and all of the sudden their life becomes unmanageable. In their stress, people turn to anything they think will help, like drugs or alcohol. Then the downward spiral continues until they become homeless. These people are not really employable in their present condition. They need help to overcome the challenges that caused their homelessness in the first place. One friend of mine, Kathy, who lives a homeless lifestyle and is addicted to alcohol and drugs, was recently given a job, a brand new set of clothes and shoes—everything she needed to start her new job. On her first day of work, she showed up late, but didn’t have clear instructions about where to go in the office building. She tried asking for directions, but the person working security couldn’t help. Not knowing what to do, Kathy walked around the building until she just gave up. She was so embarrassed that she never went back.

Most of the people we serve need some help in finding employment, like Carnene Gay, who shares her testimony in this month’s Rescuer.

Employment: The first thing Carnene says she needed to do was to stop using drugs. With no computer skills and a limited work history (she had been a mother to six kids for most of her life), she had a hard time finding a good job. At one point of extreme frustration in her job search, she even asked if she could become a professional panhandler. She figured maybe that was the only “job” she could do. We finally told her not to do it and that they provide her with a good job at a national hotel chain.

Many homeless people need the same kind of support and encouragement that Carnene received. First and foremost, they need sobriety and then counseling to learn how to take care of themselves behind and start living for God and the future. Once that is accomplished (no small task), they need support from someone like our job placement coordinator, Greg Sheffield, who helped 90 people get jobs last year. Greg is able to provide support such as resume writing, computer skills and connections to jobs that fit a person’s skill set.

So next time you think to yourself, “Why doesn’t this person just get a job,” please realize there’s often not a simple answer. If it was easy, society would have solved the issue already.

Also, ask yourself what you could do to help. If you’re a business owner, consider whether there is a job in your company that one of the homeless people we work with could do. Are you willing to have a job training program or mentoring program to give a hurting person a hand up instead of a handout? If you think of a position, give Greg a call, and he will work to find someone who is a good fit. Meaningful employment is so valuable! By taking a chance on someone, you are giving them an opportunity to rebuild their life and are making a stronger community.

Together, we can strive to end homelessness here in Utah. Employment is a big part of the solution, so please join our efforts. And if you, or someone you know, wants to take a chance on a homeless person, please contact us. We need and appreciate all your help.

God bless you.

Chris D. Crosswhite
Executive Director

CARNENE:
I feel like God blessed me with the ideal job. My goal is to graduate from the New Life Program in April and move out into my own apartment. I have never had an apartment of my own and it’s exciting to think about that. That’s really one of the best things that the New Life Program has given me—the ability to dream again.

Before, I didn’t dream at all; now I daydream all the time. I imagine decorating my apartment. I was given a red and white toaster for Christmas that will match the color scheme I am going for when I move out into my own place.

A Big Change

I feel like a new person in almost every way: physically, emotionally, financially and spiritually. If you had seen me in October of 2013, you wouldn’t believe I am the same person. Back then, I had been a lifestyle of abuse. I grew up moving a lot as my mother bounced around between seven different marriages. Some of the men she married abused my siblings and me physically, mentally and sexually.

When I grew up, my life patterned my mother. I had six kids (the first was born when I was 17) and went through three marriages. My husbands were abusive as well and I regularly drank alcohol just to try and get through the day. We were always poor and sometimes didn’t have enough to make ends meet.

On August 5, 2013, something happened that God used to change my life. My husband and I were in a fight and he began to attack me. I grabbed a kitchen knife and held it out as he lunged towards me. As he grabbed me, the knife cut his arm and he called the police. While I felt that I was just defending myself, the authorities charged me with assault. I spent a few weeks in jail and when I was released, I eventually came to live at the Rescue Mission. I didn’t want to go back to the abusive relationship I was in and had no other place to go. I had to pay a $200 fine, do 75 hours of community service and finish the New Life Program as part of my sentencing.

As I get ready to complete the program, please pray for me. I am thankful for my husband, who was there to encourage and help me find a job. I worked at all the other women in the New Life Program who had successfully found work and started to believe that I could do it too.

Finally, I secured the perfect job for me. Since I had spent my life around the house, making beds and cleaning up after my six kids, I had a lot of experience in housekeeping. So, I got a good job at a downtown hotel working for a high-end national chain. I get paid well and even have benefits. Additionally, my company has hotels all over the U.S. and the world, allows its employees to transfer to other locations and provides good opportunities to move up within the company.