



The Maggiore Chronicle

ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA

WEDNESDAY JUNE 16, 2004

THE POYNTER INSTITUTE FELLOWSHIP NEWSPAPER

Not Your Average House: Ronald McDonald

By BETSY LEE | Poynter Fellow

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By KERI WIGINTON | Poynter Fellow

A FRIENDLY HELLO. Yvonne Holloman, 50, right, a resident of the House of Mary Magdalene Empowerment on 524 Martin Luther King St. S, shares a laugh with fellow resident Harriet Keese Friday, June 11, 2004. The House provides low-rent transitional housing and faith-based therapy to women recently released from prison or women recovering from a drug addiction. The House of Paul Evangelist, located at the same address, provides similar care for men.

LEAP of FAITH

FOR YVONNE HOLLOMAN, IT'S NOT ABOUT CROSSING A LINE, IT'S ABOUT A NEW BEGINNING.



By KAREN SANBORN | Poynter Fellow

The Chaplain's bellow beckons them out, Bibles in hand. They plunk their chairs into the yard's dust and arrange themselves in a half-moon around a wooden podium. While waiting for the Chaplain to begin, some folks lean back and savor the dewy dusk; others try to flap it away with paper fans.

Evening Bible study is a ritual at the House of Mary Magdalene Empowerment. Residents, about 25 this evening, gather to hear the word, to thank the Lord and to send up a verse of "Amazing Grace."

Yvonne Holloman, 50, sits at the crest of the half moon. She nods along with the sermon, murmuring "Thank you" and "Amen" more often than anyone else. She claps in approval one moment; in the next, she softly asks the residents to pray for her family.

For Holloman, the House of Mary Magdalene Empowerment was a beacon, its beams of light slicing through the dark streets of Midtown. She, like all other residents of the House, was lost in a 15-year drug addiction to crack cocaine. Though numerous attempts at rehabilitation failed her before, something in the House inspired what was missing before: a reconciliation with God. Like many other people in recovery, Holloman's greatest asset is perseverance.

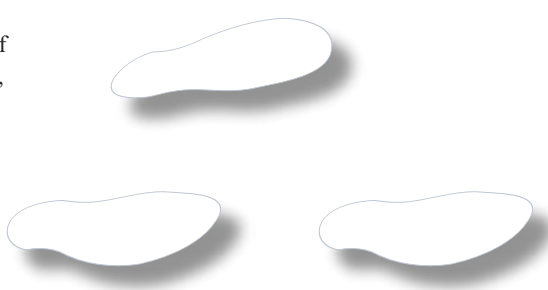
She nurtures this rekindled relationship during the spirited Bible study sessions, where now, she stands in conversation with a friend while all around her, people shake hands and share belly laughs.

Mornings are quieter. Holloman wakes in early silence, slips out to the back porch, cradling her devotional books. (When God orders rain, she resorts to the kitchen.)

This is her time to have a private conversation with Him, though she often finds herself pulling Him aside during the day. She's faithfully reconstructing her life, piece by piece, with God as her foundation.

"In order to start my day out, I start with Him," she says. "So far, it's working out OK."

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LEAP of FAITH

The Mary Magdalene House



Photos By KERI WIGINTON | Poynter Fellow

TAKING A BREAK. Holloman, who sometimes reads from her Bible five times a day, smokes a cigarette while sitting outside the House of Mary Magdalene Friday, June 11, 2004. Holloman entered the house in September 2004 after her 15-year addiction to crack cocaine ended with a night in jail. She said she is now trying to quit smoking as well. "It's just another habit, a habit like the crack," said Holloman. "I have to pray on this one."

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Holloman was born into a warm household full of love and seven siblings. The family attended church on Wednesday and Sunday. Yvonne spent Saturday at choir practice. The alto who loved singing "This Little Light of Mine" calls her childhood "perfect." But, Holloman says, perfection was fleeting. "As you get older, you get away from that straight and narrow path," Holloman says. "You trail away. I tried it one too many times."

Though her father, Alphonso, encouraged his children to continue their education, Yvonne chose a different path. She got pregnant shortly after high school and gave to birth to a daughter, Erika. During the next 15 years, she moved around. To Tallahassee, back to Plant City and then briefly to Lakeland. She worked various customer service jobs, one at an auto insurance company and another in a collections department for uninsured motorists. In her mid-30s, Holloman moved back to Plant City, worked at another insurance company, met a man and had a son, Erik. She drank and smoked marijuana, pulling away from the roots her family had worked hard to maintain. At age 35, crack cocaine yanked her up and out completely.

A self-proclaimed "late bloomer" to the drug, Holloman tried crack for the first time with Erik's father. She said he supplied the pipe and the powder. She said she smoked, at first, to keep him closer to their new Plant City home.

One wall of their den had always featured a bright, jungle mural. But that night, Holloman inhaled, and a leopard, an elephant and a monkey leapt forth. The animals seemed to be alive, she said.

"At first it was like I could hear the grass growing," she says. "It was a good feeling. In the end, it scared me. The paranoia."

The animals were replaced by hallucina-

tions: sirens, cops breaking in, loved ones discovering her bunkered in the den. Holloman was so scared she didn't smoke again for weeks. But this was just the beginning of a treacherous road, riddled with wild, drug-induced accelerations and sudden, guilt-ridden halts. Holloman tells the story this way:

She left Erik's father, who died shortly after, and moved to Michigan, staying clean for two years. In 1992, at age 37, she moved back to Plant City and began smoking crack with old friends. Holloman's family tried to help her through the fog. Her closest sister, Constance Holloman Butler, shared a house with Ethelle, their mother. They invited Yvonne to come, get clean and land a steady job.

But the pain of her partner's death still seared. Her fingertips still found the crack.

"She was caustic. Abrupt," says Butler. "She'd punctuate her conversation with curse words."

Butler noticed her sister had lost weight. Holloman's facial twitches betrayed the drug in her veins. Butler said she caught her sister searching for pennies on the floor, savings for the crack.

The sisters fought, and Holloman moved out. The cycle continued. She awoke wondering where and when she could smoke. She slept under a blanket of guilt, but it wasn't stifling enough to set her straight.

Nothing was. Not even God. "He was on my back burner," Holloman says.



A DAY OUT. Keese, left, and Holloman walk to a bus stop Saturday, June 12, 2004, so they can spend their morning at the Wagon Wheel Flea Market on Park Boulevard. Although Holloman suffers from asthma and fibromyalgia, a condition that causes severe muscle pains, she said she likes to get out of the house. "I might go out and go shopping," said Holloman. "It beats going out and using."

“As you get older, you get away from that straight and narrow path.”

Yvonne Holloman



EVENING SUPPER. A Christian-themed drawing adorns the refrigerator in Holloman's kitchen. A former resident's daughter gave the print, which is surrounded by magnets with inspirational messages written on them. Holloman cooks dinner for herself in the background.

"I didn't want to be a hypocrite. I couldn't allow myself to sing in a church choir and go home and smoke a hit of crack."

The bonds of kinship frayed, especially with her son Erik, who moved to live with relatives when he was in high school.

"I felt less than a mom," she said. "I felt lost. I felt stupid. I felt worthless. But there was nothing I could do about it."

These feelings weren't enough to stop her. Long ago, Holloman gauged what "rock bottom" was. Rock bottom was jail. Rock bottom was where she went when the police arrested her on August 29, 2003, for possession. To be there, she said, was more than a nightmare.

"I was tired," she said. "I was tired of the lifestyle. I was tired of being paid on Friday morning and being broke by Friday night. I said to myself, 'You'll be 50 years old. What are you going to do? What are you going to do?' So I made the choice to stop."

“Hello. Hello. Hello-oo,” she calls out, exasperated. Holloman gets the attention of four kids outside the House of Mary Magdalene Empowerment. They're spinning the radio dial and thundering around in a parked car on the property. A little quiet, please.

"Thank you," she says, uncrossing her shiny gold sandals.

It doesn't take much for people at the House

to listen to Holloman. Since joining on Sept. 8, 2003, she's become something of a beacon herself.

"Her whole outlook on life has changed," says Chaplain Lester Bell, co-founder of the House. "Things that were once important to her aren't. Things that should be important have become her priority."

When Holloman first arrived at the House, days after her night in jail, she was withdrawn. But Holloman opened up with the help of Chaplain Bell and his wife, Evangelist Cynthia Bell.

The House of Mary Magdalene Empowerment was founded by the Bells in 2001. According to the House pamphlet, its mission is to "induce a change of rigid, negative patterns set earlier in one's life and prevent the pattern from repeating itself." This is achieved by participation in the Recover-All program.

Written by the Chaplain in 1984, Recover-All aims to "promote tolerance, alleviate mood disturbance symptoms and integrate the whole being through therapeutic programs." It also means all 81 women put their faith in God.

The process takes time. "I think that Yvonne—it's almost like a flower," says friend and fellow House member Tina-Marie (who preferred to omit her last name.)

"She was meek and quiet and watched everyone. She wasn't sure of herself. I've watched her blossom."

After four months, the Chaplain noticed something special within Holloman. He delegated responsibilities to her, such as driving women to

court, doing nightly check-ins and serving as a liaison among the women.

But perhaps her most important role is one she's assumed quietly, without direction. It's the role of counselor.

"I'm kind of like a mother around here," Holloman said. "I'm easy to talk to. I'm on a close walk with God."

Other residents find comfort in her unwavering eyes and quiet advice. She tells them the drug does not discriminate. She tells them to "step out on faith."

It's her favorite phrase, says Tina-Marie. "The residents can lie to a sympathetic counselor, but they can't lie to an empathetic counselor," says the Chaplain.

Holloman has seen other women come and go from the House, struggling down the same road it took her 15 years to navigate. But any personal urge to return to her old life exists only as a flicker in Holloman's mind.

"I'm past that," she says, shimmying a silver bracelet around her wrist. "[It's] a moment, and it passes."

Constance Holloman Butler is thankful her sister rediscovered her God.

"They're taking a harder line with her than other treatment places she's been in," Butler said. "This one is more church-oriented. That was the only way she was going to get out of this perpetual thing, if she has something to hold on to."



FINDING PEACE. Holloman raises her hands while singing "Amazing Grace" during the conclusion of Bible study held at the Mary Magdalene House, Monday, June 14, 2004. Residents of the house, along with male residents of the House of Paul Evangelist, attend a group church service every night.



WRAPPING UP THE DAY. Holloman talks on the phone outside the House on 524 Martin Luther King St. S., Tuesday, June 15, 2004. Although the House of Paul Evangelist, a ministry for men, is located in the same building, unmarried women and men do not share the same floor.