

The Road to Recovery

by Octrisha Parker

While in denial, I came face to face with many truths that I was neither ready nor willing to embrace. I denied myself my children's infancy and young years when they needed me most. I alienated myself from friends and family and I had no faith or trust in anything or anyone. I truly believed everyone wanted to hurt me or bring me pain.

I know what it feels like to be homeless. During my years of drug use, I slept in a tent, the bus terminal, on the train, on a park bench, wherever possible. I really did not care about having a home. I endured physical abuse, sexual abuse, hunger, and blackouts from lack of sleep. Yet my only concern was where I was going to get the next fix.

My arrest proved to be my rescue from drug abuse. I was in prison at Riker's Island for six months and there I had time to think. When I realized I might be facing a sentence of four and a half to nine years, I agreed to go into an 18-month recovery program as an alternative to incarceration. I was now motivated to ask for the help I needed to begin the long road to recovery.

The waiting period for an available spot in the Palladia program kept me incarcerated for six months since I was unable to make bail. Amidst all of the degradation, humiliation, and violence I was either subjected to or forced to observe, I became increasingly aware of all the pain I had caused my family, myself and, most of all, my children.

I was released from Palladia after only 12 months of in-patient treatment. I proved to Palladia that I was ready for the outside world and they subsequently recommended to the District Attorney that I be allowed to find housing and enter their six-month aftercare program.

While at Palladia, I attended groups that offered me a safe haven to address sensitive issues.

I learned that we are products of our past; that those of us who had painful childhoods are determined to get away from our memories, but we cannot. When we are in denial, we repeat the physical and emotional patterns set by our families. The only way to stop the cycle, to break the pattern, is to go back and deal with the pain. I had been trapped in my addiction for many years. In time, I completely surrendered and embraced the pain of my past so I could move on. I also completed a work readiness program before I graduated from Palladia.

I feel in control of my life and am ready to deal with life on life's terms. I know now that I do not have to medicate my pain with drugs anymore. I need and have found a supportive group of people with whom to share my pain. It includes my therapist, my sponsor, my support group, and Narcotics Anonymous (NA).

Somehow, as time goes by many problems seem less important. My biggest struggle has been my appearance. My self-esteem needed a giant boost, so I set a goal to lose 50 pounds and set out to get the job done by making exercise an important part of my daily regimen. I changed my attitude towards food and six months later, I am proud to say, I reached my goal. To date I have lost 52 pounds and I feel like the true me has finally emerged from mounds of stashed pain and pounds. I have realized that I can do anything if I set my mind to it and work hard.

Today, my self-confidence has a positive effect on the people I know, as well as on the many new friends I have made. My friends and family have welcomed me back into their lives with open arms and without judging me. I notice that people in my community, or whom I see daily, give me much more respect. I always encourage others to "get busy" working on themselves.

I joined The Fortune Society a year ago. The

Coming to the United States

Fortune Society affords me the opportunity to maintain structure in my life and helps me reach my career goals. I have completed the Career Development Group, which helped me prepare for job interviews, to write a resume, and to work on job skills development. I also focused on the areas that needed improvement and used the computer lab to enhance my writing and computing skills. I am exploring and expressing myself through my writing and I am also taking a Business Computing class. This training will help prepare me for the workforce.

My advice to anyone wanting help but not knowing how to ask for it is to find someone you can talk to, be it a good friend or a thera-

pist. Identify the problem; accept the fact that you have a problem. Be ready, willing, and able to ask for help and to work on your problem. There are all types of resources available to help you address your issues. If you are an ex-offender, The Fortune Society has multiple programs to help you achieve your goals. All you need to do is ask for the help you want.

To learn more about The Fortune Society visit www.fortunesociety.org.

Octrisha Parker was born in Cleveland, Ohio. She came to New York in 1973 in search of success and to escape the pain of her past. In New York she discovered that she could not hide from herself. She has been clean and sober for three years.

Making a U-turn by Ivette Hernandez

I came to the United States at the age of nine to live with my mother, brothers, and sisters. The cold winter and different culture were new to me. In school I was very scared around the Americans, but it was the beginning of my new life. My four sisters and two brothers helped me to learn the English language.

At the age of 11, we moved from Cleveland to Lorain, Ohio and my mother enrolled us in elementary school. I got a lot of help from the bilingual teachers, especially Mr. Garcia. I will never forget him because he gave me very good advice. He always reminded me to never give up on my education and also not to let go of my future dreams, which were to improve my English and to graduate. He also said that without a good education I was going to float from one minimum wage job to another. I really didn't pay too much attention then, but now I know that he was right.

I remember my mother wasn't too expressive, but deep inside I knew she was very proud of me when I passed to high school with A's, B's, and 1 C. But in the 12th grade I became very rebellious. I left my house and went on the wrong

routes. I dropped out of the 12th grade. I started off with two jobs, working 10 to 12 hours a day. At the age of 18 and a half, I became pregnant with my first son. I am now 33 years old and have five children.

I have spent many years of my life seeing others get their diplomas, college degrees, and good paying jobs. Now it's time to better myself. As I grow, I learn from my mistakes. You don't stay 18 forever, and one day I just opened my eyes and realized that I am 33 years old with five children that depend on me. They deserve a better life.

It is time for me to stop looking at what I could have been. It doesn't matter how many years have passed, there is always a chance to make a u-turn in life. That is why I am taking GED classes. After I finish, I plan to go to college. I will make a better future for my children and me.

Ivette Hernandez is enrolled in the Lorain, Ohio ABLE/GED program. She hopes to graduate this year and plans to study English/Spanish translation at Lorain Community College.