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News / Insight

Jamaica T.O.: Paulette Walker, peer support workers, offers hope to drug addicts

Being jailed for drug trafficking was a lifesaver — scaring her straight to a place where she now guides addicts out of “a horrible pit.”

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By: [Royson James](#) Toronto Politics, Published on Sat Nov 03 2012

Even as she was strung out on cocaine, waking up in places and with people that repulsed and shamed her, Paulette Walker prided herself on the fact she had never been busted.

Inside the Star

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assault or harassment

As it turned out, selling drugs to an undercover cop 10 years ago, and being hauled off to jail, was a lifesaver — scaring her straight to a place where she now guides addicts out of what she calls “a horrible pit.”

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We're at old city hall, at the Toronto Drug Treatment Court, an enlightened alternate justice initiative that seeks to rehabilitate rather than incarcerate people who abuse drugs.

This is Walker's office — where she sells hope instead of crack to clients who need the former but are hooked on the latter.

“Client” after “client” approaches the judge to report on their success or failure in staying drug-free since the last drug court appearance.

How the news ruined Halloween: Menon

“Any drug use?” the judge asks.

“No drug use,” reports the man in the flaming red shirt.

About 15 of his peers — and the court clerk, crown attorney, judge and Walker — applaud in support. It gives you chills.

“Any use in jail?” he asks another. “Ecstasy? Heroin?”

This is what Walker faced in November 2002 after a night at the West Detention Centre. She was at the bottom of slow, 20-year slide into despair.

“I lost my mind, I lost my self, I became somebody else. I kept asking God, please help me.”

She'd enter a crack house, and it would be two weeks before she got out. She lost her four children. “By the end of 20 years I was so sad, so depressed, so worn out. I had no hope.”

In the West Detention Centre for trafficking, she heard about a “drug diversion program” in which addicts could get treatment instead of jail time.

She recalls being ashamed as she stood before Justice Paul Bentley, now deceased. He threw her a lifeline.

“That man — he showed me such kindness,” Walker recalls, tearing up. “He asked me, gently, ‘How long?’ Do I want to stop? He reprimanded me the way a father would. ‘Don't you think you are worth it?’ he asked me.”

She promised she would stop.

“I kept that promise. I slowly worked at my life, my childhood traumas, learned how to forgive myself for my mistakes.

“Now, life has to have a reason.”

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Walker, who underwent a nine-month treatment program, had something most drug addicts respect — street cred. She'd been there. And she survived. The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) recognized this and hired her for three hours a week as a peer support worker.

In 2008, she became Canada's only peer support worker in Toronto's drug court.

She's also in demand as a speaker, even appearing before the United Nations in Vienna in 2005.

On the day the Star shadowed 50 Jamaicans, Walker conducted her normal support group for female detainees at West Detention. Then she boarded the train for London to motivate and encourage social workers and counsellors dealing with addictions.

"There's hope. They need to hear that. When they hear me speak, they ask, 'You were out there for 20 years and you turned your life around?' Yes. With support and self love."

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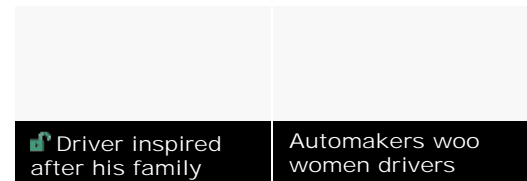
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