

“FACES OF HOPE: Tough Love Greets Mothers: Program helps them regain their lives”

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Melissa Sucharew's name can no longer be found on the homeless rolls.

Clean and gainfully employed, she now has a roof over her head, but more important than any of that, she is on the cusp of gaining the key reasons for her night-to-day transformation - her children.

“I now have overnight, unsupervised visits with them,” said Sucharew, who is one step closer to getting full custody of her two boys who were placed in foster care eight months ago amid intentional child abuse allegations at the hands of her boyfriend.

Up until late last year, the 25-year-old's imploding world was driven by a \$100-a-day marijuana habit, life on the streets and virtually no chance of getting her children back.

“I knew I had to do things differently,” said Sucharew, who landed on the doorstep of **Nia Imani Family Inc.**, a transitional living program for mothers in substance-abuse recovery and their children.

Since December, the 14-unit apartment building at N. 25th and W. Vliet streets has served as an anchor for Sucharew as she underwent drug rehabilitation, reunited with her children during weekend visits and learned how to confront her demons.

“We make them face the issues they don't want to face,” said **Belinda Pittman**, who runs the facility using a tough love approach to helping women get their acts together.

At first, she said, many of the mothers bring their street-wise mentality with them.

“They will lie and tell us things they know aren't the truth. I tell them, 'You are lying and who is that going to have an affect on in the long run?' ” Pittman said. “A light then goes on. They break down that cover and realize we are advocating for them.”

Each mother is expected to adhere to the rules of the “family” that include an 11 p.m. curfew, evening group sessions with other mothers and the active pursuit of job training and further education.

They are allowed to live rent-free at the facility until their lives are stabilized. Then, they must start paying rent as a step toward self- sufficiency. A one-bedroom apartment is \$325, two bedrooms, \$400, and three bedrooms, \$425. They can live at the facility for up to two years.

So far, 170 women have transitioned from the facility during its 11-year history. Many of them have been successful, including Monica Collins.

"It was the best thing that ever happened to me," said Collins, a former alcoholic and cocaine addict. "Since I've been there, I have begun to live. Before that, I was merely existing."

Collins had a few false starts, though, before leaving the facility for good. "From time to time, I would pack my bags and say I was moving and I would stay. I wanted to make sure I could do exactly what I wanted for myself and my children."

Collins, who has six children, two of them grown, has been on her own now for two years.

Sucharew knows her day is coming.

"I know I'm a strong person from what I've been through. I now take life on life's terms," she said. "I know that through this storm, there is another sunny day."

Faces of Hope focuses on people in the Milwaukee area who need a hand and the agencies that are helping them. Ideas? Call urban affairs reporter Felicia Thomas-Lynn at (414) 224-2073, or e-mail ftbomaslynn@journalsentinel.com. Copyright 2007, Journal Sentinel Inc.