

**“SNAPSHOTS: Recovering addict finds sober road tough, but worth the toll”
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, November 4, 2004, by Crocker Stephenson**

Mary Hamilton started drinking beer when she was 9, moved on to liquor and weed in her teens, started having babies, addicted herself to crack.

What kind of woman buys drugs rather than food for her children? A desperate woman. A woman like Mary Hamilton. Sometimes, even when she had food to offer her kids, she'd sell it to buy crack. She had three boys; their lives were hell.

By 1995, Hamilton was in her early 30s and had nothing but her hunger. Her youngest son, who was 10, lived with her mother in Rockford, Ill. Her two oldest, 12 and 14, lived with her brother. She had nowhere to go. She had heard about a program called Nia Imani Family. She went there.

Nia Imani (which are the Swahili words for "purpose" and "faith" and are two of the seven principles of Kwanzaa) had been founded the year before by Belinda Pittman. Pittman had once been a homeless mother, living in a shelter with her three children.

Two things struck Pittman about the women she met at the shelter: Virtually all were addicts, though Pittman was not. And many, Pittman believed, as a result of their addictions, seemed destined, even resigned, to drift from shelter to shelter, dragging their children in their chaotic wakes.

Pittman vowed that when she got back on her feet, she would find some way to address addiction, homelessness and shattered families. She started a cleaning business and in time opened Nia Imani, a transitional housing program that teaches independence and basic family skills to mothers in recovery.

Hamilton remained at Imani for nearly two years. She was drug free the entire time, and after she graduated from the program, she held down a job and got on with her life. She tried to renew her relationships with her children, but they had grown to mistrust her, and the bonds were tenuous.

Two years ago, Hamilton lost her job, lost her apartment, got involved with a man who was using drugs and began once again to smoke crack. Early last year, she returned to Nia Imani, worse off than ever.

"I was ashamed," Hamilton said. "I had been sober for the first time in my life. I had been given a chance. And it had been so hard. I thought, 'Ain't no way I can do it again.' "

Pittman took her in. For a while, Hamilton slept on Pittman's couch, then moved into one of the 14 Imani apartments at N. 25th and W. Vliet streets. Residents there are expected to pay monthly program fees, which cover their rent, and they are expected to participate in the Imani Family support programs, which are held in the building.

Recovering addicts know it is easy to fall and hard to get up. Like Hamilton, they know that they can only take one day at a time, even when those days add up to months and to years.

Hamilton has been sober for 18 months, and on Nov. 14, she and two other Imani women will graduate from the program during a fund- raising concert at Villa Terrace. She hasn't told anyone in her family, not even her sons, that she is about to graduate. She said that's because she is too focused on the issue at hand: getting through today.

*Contact Crocker Stephenson at (414) 224-2539 or by e-mail at cstephenson@journalsentinel.com.
Nia Imani Family will hold its ninth annual concert at the Villa Terrace Decorative Arts Museum, 2200 N. Terrace Ave., on Nov. 14. The event begins at 6 p.m. For more information, call (414) 933- 1633.
Copyright 2004, Journal Sentinel Inc.*