



STAND IN THE GAP'S

# Women in Transition



## WHO IS WIT?

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### *The Women in Transition Team*

The women in Transition Team is made up of Rhonda Bear, Kathy Peacock, Tammy Franklin, and Shaunte Gordon (see her story on page 16).

All of these women have been incarcerated and experienced the Women in Transition course, a post-release Stand in the Gap small group, or both. Their life experiences give them a unique voice when they go back into prison walls to facilitate the Women in Transition course, emphasize the significance of a post-release transitional living home, or promote the Stand in the Gap small group experience. According to Chaplain McCollum of Eddie Warrior Correctional Center, "In Stand in the Gap's Women in Transition class, [the facilitators] add the dimension of 'You can make it. I did.'"

*Pictured: Kathy Peacock, a Women in Transition client, Rhonda Bear, Susan Esco (see page 10), and Tammy Franklin*

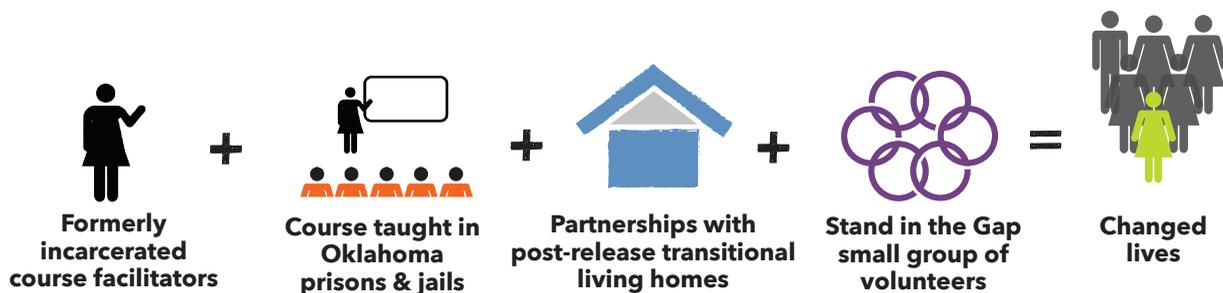
Women in Transition is a three-stage program.

First, SITGM Women in Transition staff (all formerly incarcerated women) teach our Women in Transition curriculum inside ten Oklahoma prisons and jails. Our course facilitators share their personal stories as well as practical education.

Second, after a woman is released, our course facilitators provide one-on-one mentorship support to ensure that course graduates are willing to follow through on their commitment to life change.

Lastly, SITGM recruits and trains a small group of volunteers to come around a woman who is actively pursuing a healthy life after incarceration. Women in Transition volunteers commit to meet in their small group at least twice a month, for a minimum of one year. A Stand in the Gap small group walks with a woman through her transition process, offering encouragement, mentoring, and most importantly, providing prayer support.

A Stand in the Gap small group provides mentoring, as well as relational, emotional, and spiritual support over the course of at least one year. They model healthy and respectful relationships. Through these caring, committed experiences, small groups empower women to make wise, healthy life decisions and transition to life after crisis. Key objectives include breaking the cycle of poverty, reunifying families, and remaining out of prison.



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## WOMEN IN TRANSITION COURSE CURRICULUM TOPICS INCLUDE

- » LEARNING TO SET HEALTHY BOUNDARIES
- » CHARACTERISTICS OF CO-DEPENDENCY
- » DEALING WITH STRESS AND ADDICTIONS
- » COPING STRATEGIES FOR ANXIETY AND GRIEF
- » COMMUNICATION SKILLS
- » UNDERSTANDING AND EXPRESSING ANGER
- » USING GOALS TO GAIN SUCCESS
- » RE-ENTRY AND CHILDREN
- » PRACTICAL STEPS AND RESOURCES FOR RE-ENTRY

151

OUT OF EVERY 100,000 WOMEN IN OKLAHOMA ARE INCARCERATED. THAT IS MORE THAN DOUBLE THE NATIONAL AVERAGE AND THE HIGHEST (PER CAPITA) IN THE UNITED STATES.

SOURCE: THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

>60%

OF WOMEN IN STATE PRISONS HAVE A CHILD UNDER THE AGE OF 18.

SOURCE: THE SENTENCING PROJECT

## WHERE IS WIT?

*The Women in Transition course is offered in 10 Oklahoma prisons and jails.*



### WIT Course Partners

- Oklahoma Department of Corrections, Women's Prison System
- David L. Moss County Jail (Tulsa)
- Delaware County Jail (Jay)
- Eddie Warrior Correctional Center (Taft)
- Kate Barnard Community Corrections Center (Oklahoma City)
- Mabel Bassett Correctional Center (McCloud)
- Oklahoma Community Correctional Center (Oklahoma City)
- Oklahoma County Jail (Oklahoma City)
- Turley Correction Center, via collaboration with Resonance Center for Women (Turley)
- Rogers County Jail (Claremore)
- Women's FirStep Recovery Program (Norman)



### Transitional Living Home Partners

- Branch 15 Transition Home for Women (Oklahoma City)
- Christian Helping Hands (Duncan / Comanche)
- Eagle Christian Ministry (Oklahoma City)
- Exodus House (Tulsa)
- His House Transition Homes for Women (Claremore and Edmond)
- Inside Out Reentry Services (Tulsa)
- Jehovah Jireh Christian Recovery Program for Women (Oklahoma City)
- Naomi House Transition Home for Women (Ardmore)
- New Life Homes (Tulsa)
- ReMerge Program (Oklahoma City)
- Women's FirStep Recovery Program (Norman)

*Women in Transition partners with 12 transitional living homes to provide post-release support to course graduates.*

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 3, 2018

## Why Oklahoma Has the Most Women Per Capita in Prison

*System admits more nonviolent offenders than others and imposes harsher sentences*

By Elizabeth Winkler



Great Plains Correctional Facility in Hinton, Okla.; The Oklahoma Department of Corrections has requested more than \$1.5 billion for next year, tripling its current budget of \$485 million. PHOTO: SUE OGRONKI/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Oklahoma incarcerates more women per capita than any other state—about 151 out of every 100,000 women, double the national average.

The total prison population, including men, reached 28,850 in June 2016, according to an official report.

Voters passed two measures aimed at effecting change, and both went into effect in July despite lawmakers' efforts to repeal them. One reduced certain low-level crimes, including drug possession, from felonies to misdemeanors punishable by treatment instead of jail time. The second created a fund intended to allocate savings from the reduction to rehabilitation programs, including drug and mental-health treatment.

The Department of Corrections has requested more than \$1.5 billion for next year, tripling its current budget of \$485 million. More than half of the funds are needed to build two new prisons, said Joe Allbaugh, the department's director. The rest would go to operating expenses such as repairing old prisons, funding substance-abuse treatment, and giving pay raises to staff. A \$215 million budget shortfall makes it unlikely that the request will be approved. Lawmakers will make a decision during the upcoming legislative session.

The state's high incarceration rate isn't due to an unusually high crime rate. It is the result of extremely punitive laws, says Susan Sharp, a professor of sociology at the University of Oklahoma and

author of "Mean Lives, Mean Laws," a book about the state's female prisoners. Many states have cut their prison populations by reducing sentences for nonviolent crimes and investing in drug and mental-health treatment. In Georgia, which was facing a projected 8% prison growth in 2011, policy makers introduced reforms that led to a 6% decline by 2015, lowering costs for taxpayers.

But Oklahoma continues to admit more nonviolent offenders than other states—48% more than its neighbor, Missouri, which has a similar crime rate. It also imposes harsher sentences. In recent years, some counties have increased sentences.

Since 2011 the state's female prison population has grown 30%. Most are serving time for drug crimes. With prisons operating at 110% capacity, some inmates are now housed in county jails, waiting for a spot to open up. The state's female prison population is projected to grow 60% in the next 10 years. The total prison population is projected to grow 25% over the same period, according to a study by the state's Justice Reform Task Force.

Phyllis VanScoy, an inmate at the Oklahoma City Community Corrections Center, has been addicted to drugs most of her adult life. It started at 16, when she went looking for her mother. Raised by relatives, she had patchy memories of her mother, a methamphetamine addict who would visit her children in the interludes between prison sentences. She found her in Oklahoma City. "I wanted to make her pay for what happened to my brother," who committed suicide when he was 13, she says.

Ms. VanScoy, now 44, became addicted, too. She is serving time for larceny and possession of methamphetamine. She worries about her 21-year-old daughter, Shaylin, a heroin addict whose three children have been taken into state custody.

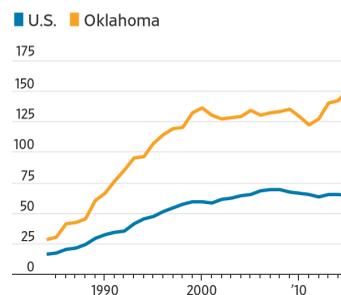
"We see this generational cycle repeat itself time and again," says Kris Steele, a former speaker of the House in Oklahoma who now runs the Education and Employment Ministry, a nonprofit that prepares inmates to re-enter society.

"For the types of crimes women are more likely to commit—nonviolent, low-level crimes—we give longer sentences than most places," says Ms. Sharp. In Oklahoma, having small amounts of illegal drugs is often classified as trafficking instead of possession, which means a harsher penalty.

Appeared in the January 3, 2018, print edition as "Number of Female Prisoners Continues to Rise in Oklahoma."

### Behind Bars

Oklahoma has had the highest female imprisonment rate in the nation for the past few decades.



Note: Rate for every 100,000 female residents  
Source: National Prisoner Statistics Program

Now, Phyllis is out of prison and meeting with a Stand in the Gap small group!

**IN THE UNITED STATES,**

*2 out of 3*

**RELEASED PRISONERS  
WERE REARRESTED  
WITHIN 3 YEARS.**

**IN THE LAST 3 YEARS,  
MORE THAN**

*90 percent*

**OF WOMEN WHO COMPLETED  
THE ENTIRE WIT PROGRAM  
HAVE NOT BEEN REARRESTED.**



*90%*

**OF SMALL GROUP GRADUATES ARE  
REUNITED WITH THEIR CHILDREN.**

**IN THE LAST 3 YEARS,**



*150*

**KIDS WERE REUNITED  
WITH THEIR MOTHERS  
AFTER MOM COMPLETED  
THE WOMEN IN  
TRANSITION PROGRAM.**

**IF THOSE CHILDREN WERE IN  
FOSTER CARE INSTEAD, THEY  
WOULD COST THE STATE MORE THAN**

*\$1,000,000*

**EACH YEAR.**



# Small Group Stories



## Jena's Story



On March 25, 2015, Jena Barnhill emerged from the water at Crossings Community Church. Looking into the crowd, she saw her roommates and Stand in the Gap family. The women were on their feet cheering. They had come in spite of the spring storm and tornado sirens outside.

Jena looked down at her ankle to the symbol of her past. Unwrapping the tight layers of plastic trash bags and tape from her leg, she could tell that her Department-of-Corrections-issued GPS ankle monitor had suffered no ill effects from its submersion in water. Two years later, Jena tears up at the memory. "The monitor wasn't supposed to be underwater, but I knew God would protect that ankle monitor for my baptism," she says.

*"I became this person that my family no longer knew."*

In 1998, Jena was an overweight 21-year-old living in her hometown in California. From an early age, she struggled with an addiction to food. Her weight became part of her personality and a large part of the way she viewed herself and context for her relationships with other people. That year, she had gastric bypass surgery forcing her to stop using food in the same way. The weight came off quickly and with it, Jena says, "I began to lose pieces of who I was." At the same time, her mom and stepfather were divorcing. "My world was turned up-side-down." Jena calls herself "very young" and "unequipped" to deal with the rapid and radical changes in her life.

She began drinking heavily. One night, after the bars closed, an acquaintance introduced her to methamphetamine. Jena calls meth "an instant hook." After one hit, Jena was an everyday user.

Drugs led Jena and her boyfriend, Rich, into criminal behavior. Jena lost her job after attempting to embezzle from her employer. She went to jail in California on seven misdemeanor charges. She says, "I

became this person that my family no longer knew."

After a few years, Jena and Rich decided to escape their troubles by moving to Oklahoma, Rich's home state. By the time Jena had their son, Brantley, in 2004, Jena and Rich were using drugs regularly and "involved in criminal activity." Brantley was adopted by Rich's mother before Jena delivered their daughter, Colby, a few years later.

"For the first three years of her life," Jena remembers, "we couldn't get it together." Colby was in foster care when Jena picked up the charges that sent her to drug court. While participating in drug court, Jena did not use drugs. But she could not stop the criminal behavior. The excitement and cash influx of her lawless behavior, she believes, was more addicting to her than drugs ever were. However, immediately following her May graduation from drug court, with all charges against her dismissed, Jena began using drugs again. By June, she "picked up another case" that would eventually land her in prison.

## *"Now I know it was the Holy Spirit working in me."*

Jena was incarcerated for two and a half years. She served time at Eddie Warrior and then Kate Barnard Correctional Centers. At Eddie Warrior, she started attending nightly church services. Each night, Jena was in tears. "At the time," she remembers, "I thought 'Why am I so affected by this?' Now I know it was the Holy Spirit working in me."

She attended Stand in the Gap's Women in Transition class. Meeting the instructor, Rhonda Bear, was a watershed moment for Jena. "I thought that because I'd been in prison, my life was over. Rhonda did not embody anything like my stereotypical idea of what an ex-offender looked like. That gave me hope."

After being transferred to Kate Barnard, Jena became close friends with Tammy Franklin who was, at the time, a fellow inmate. Tammy disciplined Jena in the early days of her faith in Christ. When Jena's release date drew near, Tammy suggested she take the Women in Transition class again. Jena says that taking the class again, this time with facilitator Kathy Peacock, "reminded me that I needed a [post-release] plan."

Jena applied to live at the Hope House, a Stand in the Gap transitional living partner in Oklahoma City. "I knew that my journey as a Christ-centered woman had just begun and I wasn't ready to put a stop to it." Transitional living homes provide accountability, security, and structure for women as they transition out of prison. "It's such a transition period. So much can go wrong," Jena says. "I couldn't have asked for a safer place to be."

But living at the Hope House meant a huge sacrifice for Jena. Women who live in the Hope House must commit to no romantic relationships for one year. "I have known Rich for half of my life," Jena says. "I thought, we won't be together while I'm in the program, then we will just be together after." But after a few months, "I began to feel what it felt like to stand on my own two feet. I had never had that before. I realized I could never go backwards." Today, Jena and Rich co-parent their two children, who primarily live with Rich in Texas, but they haven't been a couple since they were each released from prison.

Jena was introduced to her Stand in the Gap small group a few months after moving into the Hope House. Unusually for her, she felt an instant connection to the

four women who made up her Stand in the Gap small group. "I feel like God guided me through the process of being vulnerable and it has been easy for me. This group encouraged me to get honest with myself and share that with other people. It's a relief. I know they are going to love me, no matter what I say, no matter what I disclose, it's a loving relationship."

At their regular group get-togethers every woman shared her God sightings and prayer requests. Two years after their first meeting, Jena's small group still meets for dinner as often as possible. Jena feels like participating in the lives of women who have had many different life experiences has provided her with invaluable perspective and life skills. Her faith has grown "immensely" by praying for and being prayed for by them. She takes great comfort in knowing they are "a phone call away." "I just love them," Jena says of her SITGM small group. "I can't even put words to it. I'm very grateful."

In the years since her release, Jena was baptized at Crossings Community Church where she remains active in her spiritual journey. To this day, she tears up when she hears the song "Oceans" by Hillsong, which was playing during her baptism. She is currently volunteering in a new Stand in the Gap small group, mentoring a woman who has just been released from prison.

She has worked her way up from entry-level cashier to Corporate Trainer and Catering Representative with Schlotzsky's. Her job takes her across the country, training new employees and helping to open new franchise locations.

Jena's mother moved from California to be near Jena and her grandchildren. Jena and her mom live together and are working to rebuild the relationship they had before Jena's addictions.

Although Brantley and Colby live in Texas, Jena sees them as often as possible. She is restoring her relationships with both of her children and is in the process of becoming Colby's legal guardian.

"I'd be a liar if I said that life was just perfect," Jena admits. "But I prayerfully get through each day and I trust in God to make a way for us. If I believe that, then there is hope."



Jena with her Stand in the Gap small group // Jena and her mother // Jena, with Rich and their children // Jena and Colby



## VOLUNTEER PROFILE

# Susan Esco

The five volunteers who make up Jena's Stand in the Gap small group represent three different churches. The small group gets together twice a month to talk about their needs, wounds, desires and hopes. Everyone in the group prays for each other, encourages each other and celebrates what God is doing in and through the lives of everyone in the group (not just Jena).

Here is Susan Esco's take on her volunteer experience:

*Last spring, Jena humbly listened to the Lord and chose to be baptized at our church. Some of her "gappers" were able to witness this. I have to say it was one of my favorite experiences with our team. Jena had expressed how hard this decision had been for her but she knew the Lord was guiding her. We wanted to be there to support her. It was so sweet to see her step out in faith and obedience. When we saw Jena's tears, the rest of us cried too.*

*We also attended her graduation when she finished her step study with Celebrate Recovery. We celebrated her birthday with dinner and laughter. We have worshiped and enjoyed events together. Our whole group attended the wedding of one of our "gappers". We have become a family!*

*It is so simple to be a "gapper". We show up for Jena and for each other as a team. We seek God's plan, not our own. We love through prayer and a few hours of our time each month. We are investing in the most important commodity there is, people. The results are God's so the pressure is off. He transforms lives through the love He provides through others.*

*It is one of my greatest privileges to be on Jena's team. She is one of my heroes. This experience has changed me and strengthened my faith.*

*In our group we often remind each other..."He is a good good Father...That's who He is. And, We are loved by Him... That's who we are." It is pretty simple.*



Susan Esco (right) with Jena (center) and another volunteer after Jena's baptism.

## COLLABORATION

# The University of Oklahoma

In 2014, Dr. Evie Muilenburg-Trevino, Research Specialist with the University of Oklahoma, designed a survey to assess the psychological resources and strengths of women before and after taking our WIT course. Dr. Muilenburg-Trevino determined that "hope" was an important indicator of programmatic success. The resulting survey for course participants is called "The Hope Survey."

**Results showed that "levels of positive coping skills increased, levels of negative coping skills decreased, and co-dependency scores significantly decreased" (Muilenburg-Trevino, 2015).**

 **positive coping skills**

//

 **negative coping skills**

//

 **co-dependency**

The average score of every hope-related question increased at the end of the course. According to Dr. Muilenburg-Trevino's report, "there was a statistically significant difference in ALL pre and posttests indicating improvement." In summary, completing the Women in Transition course resulted in a quantifiable improvement in each woman's capacity to successfully re-enter society.

# Transitional Living Homes



## WHY TRANSITIONAL LIVING HOMES MATTER

When a woman is released from prison and returns to the same neighborhood, same relationships, and same lifestyle that she lived before her arrest, is it any surprise that she encounters the same obstacles that led to her incarceration? Post-release transitional housing is designed to provide a safe place to live and ensure that ex-offenders have a healthy support system to aid in their return to society. Choosing a transitional living home (instead of going home) gives women a fighting chance at breaking the cycle.

## OUR PARTNERSHIPS

Stand in the Gap partners with twelve transitional living homes throughout Oklahoma. Two of these most fruitful partnerships are with His House Ministries in Claremore and Branch 15 in Oklahoma City.

His House is managed and owned by Stand in the Gap Program Manager, Rhonda Bear. Actually a collection of eight houses, His House provides space for as many as 30 women to live after they are released from prison. Residents must participate in Celebrate Recovery, commit to refrain from romantic relationships for one year, and remain sober. When a woman demonstrates her readiness, she is matched with a Stand in the Gap small group of volunteers who provide mentorship and support as she transitions to a life of real freedom.

Branch 15 offers similar support for 14 marginalized women. Executive Director, Tammy Franklin, who is also part of the Women in Transition team, says that "Transitional housing teaches [ex-offenders] how to apply the skills they learned in the Women in Transition class by allowing them to live in a community setting where the same life skills are being modeled and communicated on a daily basis."

Our partnerships with transitional living homes like His House and Branch 15 are integral to the development of healthy Stand in the Gap small groups with a strong chance of success.



Women pose with WIT Program Manager, Kathy Peacock (second from left), at Branch 15. Kathy also owns and manages a SITGM partner transitional living home. // Residents chat in the backyard at Branch 15.

PORTRAITS OF HOPE

"THEY WILL BE CALLED OAKS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, A PLANTING OF THE LORD FOR THE DISPLAY OF HIS SPLENDOR." ISAIAH 61:3

WOMEN IN TRANSITION CLIENTS, PICTURED WITH THEIR CHILDREN.



*Rhonda*



Employed as Program Manager for Stand in the Gap's Women in Transition program // Devoted wife, mother, and grandmother // Owner and Manager of His House transitional living homes for women // Owner of She Brews Coffee House // Received many community honors including YWCA "Woman of the Year" // Active advocate and volunteer for incarcerated women in Oklahoma

*Kelsey*



Recently married // started career as a Peer Recovery Support Specialist at Grand Lake Mental Health // Getting ready to purchase her first house

*Tammy*



Program Facilitator for WIT at FirStep Recovery Program // Director of Branch 15 Transitional Home // Featured speaker at Celebrate Recovery and SITGM // DOC approved volunteer // Grandmother, mother and wife in the center of many family photos

*Chantel*



Graduating from her SITGM small group and plans to volunteer for SITGM // Received full custody of her 5-year-old son // Works as a custodian at First Baptist Church // Making A's & B's at Rogers State University // 26-years-old and an amazing example for those around her

*Jodey*



Women in Transition graduate // Restored as full-time parent to her daughter // Overcame major obstacles to maintain employment and housing

*Kristal*



Volunteers in a SITGM spiritual family // Works at Pelco Structural, LLC and is an Assistant Manager at local hotel chain // House Manager of His House Outreach Ministries // Leading a women's 12 step group through Celebrate Recovery, sponsors multiple women in CR // Restored to her son and family

PORTRAITS OF HOPE

"THEY WILL BE CALLED OAKS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, A PLANTING OF THE LORD FOR THE DISPLAY OF HIS SPLENDOR." ISAIAH 61:3

WOMEN IN TRANSITION CLIENTS, PICTURED WITH THEIR CHILDREN.

*Kathy*

Employed as Program Manager Oklahoma City, teaching Women in Transition course at Mabel Bassett, Kate Barnard, and Oklahoma County Jail // Ordained Minister preaching in prisons since 2011 // Restored relationships with children and grandchildren // Owner and Manager of Jehovah Jireh transitional living home



*Danielle*

Reunited with her children and has healthy family relationships // Owns her own home // Earned various promotions at her job // Graduated with Associates Degree from Tulsa Community College // Engaged to be married

*Melissa*

Delivered from heroin addiction // Restored relationships with all of her children // Home schools her children // She and her husband are active in the Emmaus ministry and local church // The family is purchasing their first home



*Jeryka*

Married with an infant son // Employed at Leisure Time RV // Active in ministry // Purchased a home in 2016 // Sober since 2014

*Sheila H.*

Restored to her children and her mom // Started her own business called Providence Power Washing and has a couple of employees



*Amber*

His House Manager // She Brews Coffee House Manager // Hearing Aide Specialist // Restored relationships with her children // Purchased her first car without assistance



PORTRAITS OF HOPE

"THEY WILL BE CALLED OAKS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, A PLANTING OF THE LORD FOR THE DISPLAY OF HIS SPLENDOR." ISAIAH 61:3

WOMEN IN TRANSITION CLIENTS, PICTURED WITH THEIR CHILDREN.



*Debbie*

Director of Operations & Outreach for Muddy Paws // Served on several Stand in the Gap families // In the process of purchasing her first home // Describes Stand in the Gap as "being my springboard to re-enter back into society"



*Willie*

Recently "graduated" her Stand in the Gap family after almost three years // Employed for three years // Completed some college classes // Restored to her amazing daughter Lillie



*Sheila D.*

Restored to her children and grandchild // Employed at Stresscon Engineering for several years // Owns her own home



*Brandy*

Volunteers in a SITGM spiritual family // Celebrate Recovery leader // Happily married // Supervisor in an assisted living program for three years // Has been promoted at work // Work responsibilities include training and assisting in the hiring process // Restored to her two children and never misses their activities anymore // Homeowner



*Cerissa*

Volunteers in a SITGM spiritual family // Restored to her two daughters // Held two jobs for over two years // House Manager for His House Ministries and sponsors multiple women // Has "amazed" the court system in Rogers County with the changes in her life



*Sara*

After losing custody of her son, her job, car, home and self-respect, Sara moved in to Branch 15 transitional living home // Created a plan to regain custody of her son and worked towards it diligently // Today, she is restored to her son and working at a major home mortgage company // Remains in relationship with her Stand in the Gap support system



PORTRAITS OF HOPE

"THEY WILL BE CALLED OAKS OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, A PLANTING OF THE LORD FOR THE DISPLAY OF HIS SPLENDOR." ISAIAH 61:3

WOMEN IN TRANSITION CLIENTS, PICTURED WITH THEIR CHILDREN.



*Laura*

Attributes her spiritual growth to her Stand in the Gap small group of two years // Employed at the Oklahoma Blood Institute for four years // Drug free

*Vanessa*



Peer Recovery Specialist in the mental health field // DOC approved volunteer // Married and raising two children // Serving in her local church // Earned her associate degree at Roger's State University // Purchased her first home



*Crystal*

Preparing to lead a Stand in the Gap small group // Manager of a local hotel chain // Employs many Women in Transition participants // Restored to both of her sons // Recently bought her first new car

*Connie*



Living in recovery after multiple incarcerations // Restored marriage // Restored to children and grandchildren // Children living in recovery // Moved into management position at a reputable hotel chain



*Cristin*

Sober // Reunited with her two daughters and living as a family // Homeowner // Promoted to Assistant Branch Manager at a bank // "Outstanding Employee" Recipient // Still in relationship with her Stand in the Gap small group

*Sophia*



Former drug trafficker has been restored to her daughter // Marketing Manager for She Brews Coffee House // Widely respected in her community



*Veronica*

Assistant Director for a faith-based treatment center in charge of court reports and filings // Stand in the Gap small group graduate // Restored relationship with her son // In recovery from addiction // Follower of Christ



## Small Group Stories



### Shaunte's Story

The first time Shaunte went to prison, she was fifteen years old. Two years before that, she gave birth to a child after repeated sexual assaults from her stepfather. Shaunte and her daughter lived together in foster care while Shaunte's life revolved around three things; her daughter, her anger, and cocaine. Always in search of her next high, she earned money in the only way she knew how. The charges that landed Shaunte in juvenile detention and eventually prison were tragic, violent, and true.

Throughout her first twelve years in prison, Shaunte was widely regarded as one of the most difficult, angry, and aggressive prisoners in the Oklahoma women's system. Consistently, she chose to fight. She received countless misconduct reports and was placed in segregated housing multiple times, her longest stint lasting two years and four-

teen months. Her anger was the driving force behind every action.

Then, in July of 2006, at 27-years-old, Shaunte was released from prison.

A first taste of freedom was not wasted on Shaunte. But anger about her lost childhood compelled her to self-medicate in almost every destructive way imaginable. She had another child. This daughter was born addicted to four different drugs and was immediately removed from Shaunte's custody. One and a half years after her release, Shaunte was in handcuffs, in the back of a police car, riding back to prison.

That was the moment that Shaunte relinquished control of her life. "That was the end," she says. "I said, 'Jesus, save me.' "

Seven years later, Shaunte cries while she remembers, "Right away, I experienced peace that passes all understanding. That was the point where this God that I had heard about all my life, the God who parted the Red Sea and sent his son, revealed himself real to me."

By the time she arrived back at Mabel Bassett Correctional Center, news had spread of the radical change in Shaunte. Guards and prisoners clamored over each other to see her. While she served another six years, she never got in trouble. Instead, she took courses and her college entrance exam. She attended church services and

*"It makes me feel like the daughter that God came for me to be."*

distributed scriptures. And she says, "Every day that God walked with me through that sentence, I was able to say, 'This is what happened to me. It's Jesus.'" According to Shaunte, "God didn't waste all those misconducts from before, all those days in segregation, all those times of being strapped down, he never wasted it" because her "before" story gave her "after" testimony an undeniable weight.

In 2014, Stand in the Gap's Women in Transition course was not yet offered at Mabel Bassett. But the Women in Transition Program Manager, Rhonda Bear, had another way into the facility. The two women had first met while they were incarcerated together during Shaunte's first sentence. At that point, Shaunte says, "Rhonda was a church girl. We had nothing in common." When Rhonda volunteered at the prison's Kairos weekend, she saw Shaunte again.

Shaunte said, "I told Rhonda that I gave my life to the Lord and she said, 'It's about time. I've been praying for you for a long time.' God used her in my life in a way that was huge. She had been in my shoes and she kept telling me, 'You are going to make it. You are going to come to my transitional home in Claremore when you get out. I'm going to surround you with a team of mentors' and I was like, *what is she talking about?*"

Ten months after her second release from prison, Shaunte is sitting in a room with her Stand in the Gap small group. She is living in Rhonda's transitional home. She works three jobs and is attending Tulsa Community College, studying advanced manufacturing. She regularly attends Celebrate Recovery and First Baptist Church of Claremore. Shaunte talks openly about her life before Christ. And as she remembers the charges that first landed her in prison and the way she behaved there, it is nearly impossible to reconcile those stories with the respectful, smiling, empathetic, teachable, joyful young woman who is talking. Over the course of their time together, Shaunte's Stand in the Gap small group has given her practical advice and assistance. They helped her prepare for her driver's test, develop plans to open her business (an odd-jobs service), understand and create a personal budget, and care for her mother as she moved into a nursing home.

When they sit at the table, talking about their times together and Shaunte's life before they knew her, they laugh and cry with equal ease. Each of the volunteers can say, "We look at her like a daughter."

After many hours of practicing with her Stand in the Gap small group, Shaunte passed the test to re-



*Shaunte (right) with her mother, daughter, and granddaughter.*

ceive her driver's license. While she was waiting to have her photo taken at the tag agency, Shaunte's phone buzzed with a Facebook notification. It was a message from her oldest daughter.

Shaunte drove herself and her mother to see her daughter for the first time in 21 years. In the car ahead of her, two of her Stand in the Gap volunteers, Bill and Emma Lou Ray, pulled a couch, a gift from Shaunte to her daughter. In the car behind, the rest of her Stand in the Gap team, Larry and Georgiann O'Mealey, prayed for the new relationship of this family that had been separated so long.

Emma Lou remembers that afterwards, as they drove away, "I think we all felt that God was washing away the empty years and filling in the spaces."

Within this budding family relationship, there have been difficult conversations, but there have also been Christmas gifts, the joy of a three-year-old grandchild being loved by her grandmother, and a whole lot of prayer. "There's a generational curse that has been broken," says Shaunte, "we just have to walk it out."

For Shaunte, it's difficult to describe her relationship with her Stand in the Gap small group and even harder to put into words the impact they have had on her life. When she tries, she says, "When we meet together and I feel that love that is unconditional, and we are working out these problems with the practical knowledge they have of living life, and my life that has never really been lived, it's like it makes me whole. It makes my heart whole. It makes me feel like the daughter that God came for me to be."

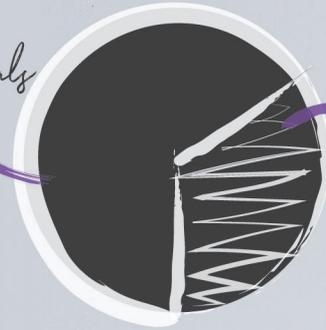
# By the Numbers...

**\$200,000**

Approximate  
**YEARLY BUDGET**

## **FUNDRAISING BREAKDOWN**

**65%**  
*individuals*



**35%**  
*foundations*

## **IF TIME IS MONEY**

**VOLUNTEERS CONTRIBUTE  
\$116,000 WORTH OF  
THEIR TIME EACH YEAR.**

## **DIVISION OF LABOR**

## **GENEROUS SPONSOR**

In 2015, 2016 and 2017, **QUIKTRIP**  
has printed a one-year supply of  
**WOMEN IN TRANSITION**

*course manuals,*  
*saving Stand in the Gap*

**\$2,500**  
*each year.*

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*contribute specifically to* **WOMEN IN TRANSITION.**

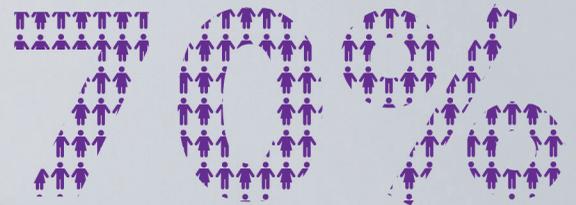
**(REMAINING PROGRAM FOUNDATION FUNDS COME FROM INVESTMENTS MADE BY OTHER FOUNDATIONS IN THE GENERAL STAND IN THE GAP OPERATING FUND.)**



**23,000**

**OKLAHOMA  
CHILDREN HAVE A PARENT  
WHO IS INCARCERATED.**

**STATISTICS SHOW THAT**



**OF THOSE CHILDREN  
WILL SOMEDAY  
BE INCARCERATED.**

# stay in touch



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