

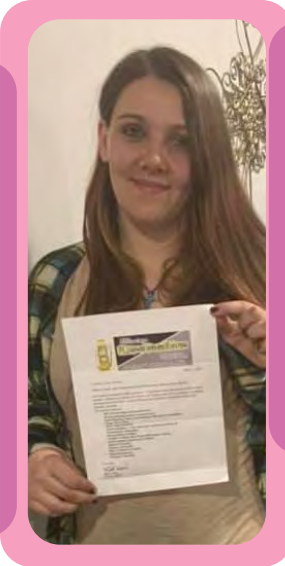
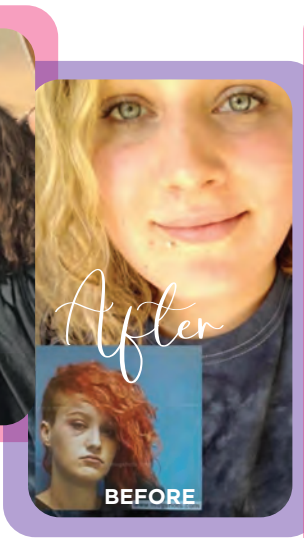
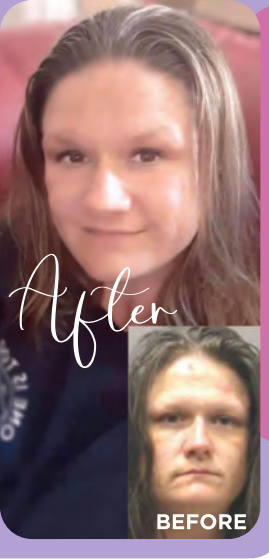
God's Amazing Hand of Grace

BY FEATURES EDITOR, BECKY WEHRSPANN

'For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.' ... And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me' (Matthew 25:35-36, 40).

As an addict attempting to take her own life by overdose, Bonnie Johnston knows she was saved only by the grace of God. For more than 20 years, she has shared God's message of forgiveness and grace with addicts hungry for a Savior. "It really doesn't matter what your background is; you can still become an addict. I'm an educated woman; my parents were both wonderful, but, by the time I was 39, I had lost almost everything." Thanks to a friend who intervened before she could end her life and a pastor who didn't turn her away, she sought help at LakePointe Church.

LakePointe Church (LCMS) in Hot Springs, Arkansas, is a church of the "least of these," according to Pastor Greg Bearss. "We're focused on reaching people most churches miss, really trying to help people who are far from Jesus."



Some years ago, Pastor Greg noticed a trend. “God kept bringing people through our door who needed help. We were getting prayer requests: ‘Please pray. I’m 21 days clean,’ ‘I’m struggling with addiction,’ ‘My wife’s incarcerated because of methamphetamines.’ We were a new church and didn’t know what to do with this.” Pastor asked a new volunteer, Bonnie, for help [group picture, far left].

When he learned of Bonnie’s past struggle with addiction, he knew she was hand-picked by God to care for the women seeking help. “We tried to connect them with a mentor and, with the right people, get them out of a toxic situation. We began circling the wagons.”

Christian families were recruited to house women released from jail until a suitable location could be found. Soon God provided a 10-bedroom house and more than \$200,000 in donations for purchase and renovation. LakePointe members, LWML groups, other churches, and businesses joined together. “It was amazing,” Pastor Greg says. “My daughter walked in the first room we renovated and said, ‘This is nicer than my bedroom! I want to live here!’ That’s exactly what we are going for. We want the women to see they are a prized possession of the Lord. He loves them, and they are not thrown away. They are not lost; they’ve been found.”

Other programs then began and thrived at LakePointe. Bonnie became a leader, helping start a recovery group which later became the Celebrate Recovery program.

One recovery class student urged her to teach at a local jail. Bonnie was reluctant: “I’ve been in jail, and I didn’t want to go back.” She conceded to try one class. “I walked in there, and, for a minute, I saw my life. I saw those girls like God sees them — His creations. They are somebody’s mom or sister or daughter, and they are in jail because they made bad choices. That could have been me.”

Bonnie recognized God’s call and His command to teach them. “I had said ‘No’ to God so many times, but He is persistent, and He knows I’ll be obedient. He will equip me with everything He wants me to do. I teach them (about) grace — God gives them all the blessings they have. I tell them, ‘He will restore your families. He will make you employable again. He will give you skills. He will put people in your lives who will trust you and believe in you.’ When we stay focused on God and give Him the glory, the blessings continue.

“All the girls at The Hope Movement have been incarcerated. As the girls get out of jail, they need a place to go to continue what we started teaching them in jail. Most of the staff and volun-

teers have been incarcerated or had drug addictions in the past. We have conversations with them that are real. Truth comes hard to these women, because it hasn’t been a big thing in their lives.”

The women trust Bonnie, now the Interim Director at The Hope Movement, because she has been one of them, and she can discern the truth from the lies during their interviews for a spot at the house. “I do all of the recruitments with a committee. Applicants go through numerous interviews because we want someone who really wants to be here. It is a transitional house: applicants must be 30 days clean and have completed a rehab program. Everybody who comes gets a chance. If we’re not the fit, I will find them a fit.”

Those who live at The Hope Movement house typically stay nine to 15 months. The staff work diligently to prepare the women to live on their own. Mandatory classes are tailored to each individual and include, among others, anger management, budgeting, parenting, and nutrition. The staff help them find a job. As the women earn money, they pay rent to



live there, but almost everything else is provided by donations.

“We have business partners who will hire them knowing their background,” Pastor Greg says. “It takes a village — the right village. We’re surrounding them with people who are safe and who love them. They’re going to Celebrate Recovery, they’re going to church, and they are involved in serving in church. All of these are requirements of the program.”

“God’s in the miracle business everyday — I’m living proof. To get to be who I am today is all God’s grace — it’s His amazing grace!”

“What we do is by the grace of God,” Bonnie adds. “We get the blessings and the privilege to do what we do, but nobody can take it lightly. These are people’s lives, and they are fragile, and they have not been loved or believed in. Living in addiction is a dark place and so lonely and desperate.”

Bonnie uses her experiences to educate others about addiction and incarceration. “The stigma that comes with being addicts and in jail is that they can’t be trusted. A girl who was 37 years old said to me, ‘Miss Bonnie, you are the very first person who ever believed in me.’ That is the hardest thing to hear. She lived 37 years without hearing that she was amazing and could do anything.”

According to Pastor Greg, “The Hope Movement is unique, because there are

all kinds of rehabs, but there isn’t this next step. We are the transition out of rehab to becoming a believer in the power of Jesus and a citizen that’s productive in society.”

Pastor Greg, Bonnie, and all The Hope Movement staff and volunteers know none of this is possible without God’s hand of grace. “God is so faithful,” Pastor Greg says. “It’s an amazing story of God’s grace and His work. He brings all the right people at the right time. He showed us a need and a way for us to carry out Matthew 25. These women who graduate from The Hope Movement are becoming role models and mentors for other women. Their families are following them and coming to church because they’ve seen their lives changed. That’s what the Gospel does — it changes people who change people.”

Bonnie’s enthusiasm shines! “I would shout from the rooftops at how much jail ministry and The Hope Movement have not only changed my life, but the lives of the girls who have been there. God’s grace is plentiful. God’s in the miracle business everyday — I’m living proof. To get to be who I am today is all God’s grace — it’s His amazing grace!” Q

The Hope Movement

The mission of The Hope Movement is to guide women recovering from an addictive lifestyle into productive citizenship through Christ-centered community reintegration.

The life-training offered is based on God’s Word. Participants are offered a chance to start over, learn how to live following Jesus, and find freedom through a restored purpose and eternal hope. A variety of classes, individual study, personal mentoring, Christian counseling, and involvement in the community are part of the program.

The Hope Movement recognizes such needs as a safe living environment, gainful employment, life-skills training, and Christ-centered counseling as vital in the transition from addiction to living life abundantly, as God intended. Discipleship training to follow Jesus is the core of the Movement.

The aim of the Hope Movement is to guide the women to become fully devoted followers of Christ. Women in The Hope Movement understand that they will one day give back and become a mentor to other women — those moving from addiction into life as contributing members to their community.

