

Parenting class instills hope during recovery

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By Deborah M. Todd, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Karen Franklin entered the Turtle Creek Valley Mental Health/Mental Retardation Inc. parenting class coming off the three most difficult years of her life.

A single mother, she went from crack cocaine use to abusing just about any drug she could find after her two sons were taken into department of Children, Youth and Families custody in 2004. At her lowest point, she ended up sleeping in the streets.

After three years of triumphs and setbacks with therapy and one month of parenting classes, Ms. Franklin is drug-free, has a part-time job, is living in her own home and will eat Thanksgiving dinner with her sons for the first time in years.

“Having my sons staying the night with me at my house, my own place, is overwhelming,” said Ms. Franklin.

“I always lived in public housing, and now this is a house. It’s not through Section 8; it’s something I accomplished from my own hard work and dedication.”

Ms. Franklin credits her years of therapy at Mercy Behavioral Health and TCV MH/MR Inc. as being vital in her transition. But she pays special homage to what she learned in parenting class for her ultimate turnaround.

“I’m able to accept I wasn’t the best parent I could be,” she said. “You have to work at it and realize what love really is.

“I’m in love with them, that’s who I’m in love with. And with me,” she added as an afterthought.

The TCV MH/MR Inc. parenting classes started Oct. 5 at Braddock’s Resurrection Baptist Church and have been operating every Saturday since.

Michelle Wangler, outpatient clinical supervisor for Adolescents, Children and Families at TCV MH/MR Inc., came up with the idea for the classes once she realized parenting was at the root of most of her clients’ problems.

The classes initially began with six people, but doubled to 12 at the most recent session. Parents who come voluntarily or as the result of court orders and service providers or who are looking for tips to help children they meet raise issues in an open forum in which everyone helps to come up with solutions.

Lisa Freeman, of TCV MH/MR Inc., said she believes the classes are successful because of this informal approach.

“It gives them an opportunity for real people to talk to other real people,” she said.

“I told them we’re not here to beat up parents. We’re here to support parents.

“CYF has requirements and the magistrate has requirements, where I don’t have requirements.

“Let’s talk, let’s work through problems. I’ll give you suggestions. If they work, they work. If not, let’s look into something else.”

Ms. Freeman also said the classes fostered an environment of cooperation among parents that went beyond Saturday afternoons.

“Parents kept coming and bringing food in addition to what I brought,” she said. “Students exchange numbers, and if someone didn’t have a ride, they would go pick them up.”

It’s this spirit of collective growth that Ms. Franklin said helped her learn the most from the class. Hearing stories about others forced her to turn her life around for the sake of her children, and gaining the support of those same people will help her keep it on the right path.

“Every situation concerning my children made [recovery] harder and made me think about giving up” she said. “But I can’t give up because they love me and they’re waiting for me.

“I needed therapy. I needed everything I got. I’m proud of myself. My kids are proud of me, my family’s proud of me and my friends are proud of me.”

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