

An Angel of Mercy

Nancy Alcorn, founder of Mercy Ministries, leads a one-woman crusade to help abused, addicted and pregnant girls find hope.

Nancy Alcorn slips into the back of the room and takes a seat. She's in a large common room at Mercy Ministries, one of several Christian homes for troubled girls, the first of which Alcorn, a charismatic, started nearly 30 years ago. On a pristine, unseasonably warm November morning in Tennessee, five girls are preparing to graduate from Mercy's Nashville home. These girls have lived here for an average of five months due to a myriad of addictions and problems, from eating disorders and substance abuse to depression.

One by one, the girls—almost all in their late teens—get up and thank their families for being there to watch them graduate before launching into their testimonies. They share experiences from their childhoods, how they came to their Christian faith and what happened to them—or what they did to themselves—that led them to seek help. Finally, graduates share what they've learned about God during their rehabilitations. Even the most cynical onlooker would have trouble not being moved by some of their stories and insights.

"I was raped. I was in the wrong place at the wrong time," says one girl, wearing what looks like a red prom dress. She pauses, trying to hold back the tears. "I felt so ashamed."

After about 40 minutes, the last girl stands up and tells a disjointed story about depression, premarital sex and an eating disorder. "I couldn't get myself out of bed. I was down to 90 pounds," she says. She later admits that after she left Mercy, she tried to kill herself, but then adds that she never actually finished Mercy's program because God told her to leave. The comment doesn't escape Alcorn's notice.

After the crowd applauds, Alcorn walks to the front of the

room and picks up a microphone. It's at this point I notice that Alcorn—a thin, attractive woman in her late 50s who seems to take pride in her appearance—is not a physically imposing person. Yet there's a reverent silence in the room as this petite woman with the steely gaze prepares to speak.

"We don't believe God told you to leave Mercy," Alcorn says calmly but firmly. "We would've loved for you to have completed [your time] with us, but God completed it." Alcorn then turns to the crowd, and in a raspy voice with a Tennessee drawl says, "And if God can extend that much mercy, why can't we? So we brought her back to graduate." During and after college, Alcorn worked at a juvenile detention facility in Tennessee, eventually becoming the facility's athletic director. But she became convinced that unless biblical principles were taught and implemented, full rehabilitation could never take place. So in 1983, she opened a girls' home in Louisiana, a pre-emptive effort to help girls put their lives back together before they ended up behind bars. She adopted the verse, "For judgment will be merciless to one who shows no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13, NASB).

Besides its facility in Tennessee, Mercy Ministries has homes in Missouri and Louisiana, and overseas in Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain. Future homes are planned for Sacramento, California; Charlotte, North Carolina; and Destin, Florida; and Canada, South Africa and Peru.

One of the interesting things about the ministry is that all who are admitted—willing girls and women ages 13 to 28 with problems that don't require full-time medical care—are granted full scholarships with free access to nutritionists, psychiatrists, counselors, high school teachers and a biblically based curriculum that addresses mental health and behavioral issues. Pastors are regular guest speakers at Mercy's homes. Mercy even has an adoption department, placing babies of single Mercy mothers with deserving families.

In order to fund such an ambitious program in many different locales while still managing to tithe 10 percent and accept no money “with strings attached,” Alcorn has utilized her network of high-profile friends and acquaintances. They have included supermodel Niki Taylor, musician Darlene Zschech, minister Joyce Meyer and Tennessee Titans coach Jeff Fisher. The local Titans donate \$10,000 to the ministry for each team win (the Titans led the National Football League in 2008 with 13 victories).

Inside the colorful corporate offices, located in suburban Nashville on a clean campus that includes the sorority-style building where the girls live, I learn that pastor and best-selling author Joel Osteen, a friend of Alcorn’s, has signed a greeting-card contract that will give 100 percent of card revenue to Mercy Ministries. It’s not an unusual arrangement; Alcorn has received proceeds from other products before, including a portion of the sales from a Thomas Nelson audio Bible.

I had been promised some extended time with Alcorn for a sit-down interview—I wanted to understand what made this powerful and influential person tick, not simply retell the story of Mercy Ministries. We were going to talk at lunch, with three other Mercy employees in attendance.

One of those employees, Christy Singleton, who oversees fundraising efforts, granted me an interview late that morning. Like most of the women employed by Mercy Ministries, Singleton is brimming with energy and enthusiasm and incredibly committed to the ministry.

A few weeks before my visit, Singleton told me over the phone that Alcorn had recently been the subject of a *Nashville Scene* newspaper feature in which she was accused by a former Mercy resident of being a homosexual (Alcorn is single and has never married) as well as other things for which there was no evidence and little corroborating testimony.

This accusation came on the heels of several young women—former residents of Mercy’s Australia home—claiming Mercy’s staff performed exorcisms and did other things that made them more, not less, suicidal. After the exorcism charges, a member of Australia’s parliament denounced Mercy Ministries as an “example of a money-making cult.”

As a result, Singleton was wary of the media and eager to defend Alcorn, whom she, along with other Mercy employees I spoke with, calls “a visionary.”

“What I watched was a person with full reason to sue ... and didn’t,” Singleton says of Alcorn’s reaction to the allegations. “When Nancy learned about the [*Nashville Scene*] article she said, ‘When that article comes out, I’m going to be doing what I’ve been doing my whole life.’ ... She’s not going to go against girls that she’s helped.”

Singleton, who has been employed by Mercy Ministries since 2004, is one of the girls Alcorn has helped. Though she never formally sought help from the ministry, Singleton—a thin woman in her late 30s—was aware of the organization before moving to Nashville because she “somehow got on the mailing list while in Florida.”

“I once had a pretty severe eating disorder. ... I would get Mercy’s magazines and just bawl,” she says. “It was the first time I truly thought freedom was possible.”

Alcorn, from what I had seen at the graduation ceremony earlier that morning, struck me as a powerful personality who could be not only encouraging but also a bit domineering on occasion. I asked Singleton about this.

“She’s pretty intense,” Singleton said. “But I’m pretty intense, too. But yes, [Alcorn is] very direct; I think she knows that about herself.” She’s also a charismatic presence, Singleton added, which explains why so many people have gravitated to Alcorn’s ministry and message over the

years—including those who might be apt to take advantage of her generosity.

But where did the generosity come from? What drives a person to dedicate her life to helping girls who have a child out of wedlock or cut themselves or refuse to eat? Even after reading reams of promotional literature, watching a graduation and talking to Singleton, I didn't have an answer.

I was thinking of this as I met Elizabeth Claybaker—a talkative woman in her 20s—for a tour of the home the girls live in, which is a stone's throw from the corporate building. Claybaker explained everything in staggering detail: the reasons for the locks on the cupboards, how the girls help prepare the meals in the spacious kitchen, which television shows the girls can watch, why the girls spend so little time in their sparsely decorated rooms, and why doors throughout the house are nearly always kept open. Beds in the rooms are made tight enough to bounce a quarter off of. Staff must document every time a girl discusses a personal problem with them.

I follow Claybaker into a small library and scan shelves filled with Christian books. Some of the books are part of the Mercy curriculum and were written by Alcorn herself, with stark, one-word titles such as *Cut*, *Starved*, *Trapped* and *Violated*.

"If you work here, you're required to read the same books and listen to the same tape series that the girls do," Claybaker says. "The underlying theme here is that absolute freedom in Christ is possible."

Claybaker adds that another theme at Mercy Ministries is "excellence."

"The way [Nancy] lives her life inspires that," says Claybaker, energetically. "Nancy has the kind of character that even if no one is looking, she's doing the right thing."

She challenges her staff to be that same way. No one spends their time here surfing the Internet."

It's around 1 p.m. and I'm in a car with Alcorn, Singleton and two other women from Mercy Ministries headed to lunch.

Alcorn is in the back seat, talking about being single. She does this with little to no prompting on my part, and I sense that the recent accusations have deeply hurt her. If the way the Nashville home is run is any indication, Alcorn strives to be above reproach: The doors in the house are all open; copies of ministry audits are available upon request.

"My desires for marriage are there and intact, but I don't feel a void. I've never sat around being sad about it ... but I still want to be married," Alcorn says. "I knew that if I was going to do this [ministry], I was going to do it with my whole heart. But if I'd known I'd still be single in my 50s, I might not have signed up for this."

Soon, we're in the restaurant—a quiet, white-tablecloth place that's already seen the lunchtime rush come and go. Alcorn orders a black coffee. I ask a barrage of questions about Alcorn's history in an effort to try to get past the standard answers. I learn that she's one of seven children, has 13 nieces and nephews, grew up Methodist—"My dad was Church of Christ, and my mom was Baptist, so they picked something nobody was," Alcorn quips—and loved sports growing up, especially basketball.

She says she didn't get serious about her faith until her late teens. "The thing that turned me off as a teenager was people saying one thing and doing another—your life has to match the message," she says.

Alcorn tells me she was wild as a high school student and loved dares—even pulling down a road sign once. A psychology teacher of hers, whose wife worked at a juvenile home for troubled girls ages 14-16, once dared Alcorn and her friends

to challenge some of these troubled girls to a basketball game.

"I was scared. It looked like a prison," Alcorn says. But not one to back down from a dare, Alcorn convinced friends to join her and was surprised by how much she empathized with the girls at the home.

"They told us they couldn't get cigarettes, so I thought, *I'm gonna sneak them some cigarettes*. I didn't know the Lord," Alcorn says. Her plot was discovered: "The warden said we couldn't come back, but being the liar I was, I said we didn't do it. But there was some kind of draw [to go back]. I don't know what it was."

Undeterred, Alcorn, through her high school sorority, raised money to purchase new sports equipment for the girls. But the warden hadn't forgotten the cigarette incident and wouldn't let Alcorn have any contact with the girls other than a photo of her presenting the equipment to them.

The photo opportunity was arranged by a state congressman who was impressed with Alcorn's work and arranged for Alcorn to get a summer position with the state-run home, in spite of the warden's objections. She worked there through college and beyond, eventually winning the warden over with her dedication and becoming athletic director.

"I became a Christian and felt bad. I had lied, and I thought, *Well, I could give these girls something they really need, not cigarettes*."

Searching for deeper insights, I point Alcorn back to her early childhood in Manchester, Tennessee, a farming community southeast of Nashville.

"I lived on a farm and I was curious, so I'd always pick up rocks and there'd be squiggly things on the bottom," Alcorn says. "I always had this inquisitive [nature]. I remember

always wanting to know why.” But something tragic happened in Alcorn’s childhood that presented her with a why she couldn’t ask.

When Alcorn was 10, her sister was killed when her father attempted to pull a tractor out of a ditch with his truck. The hitch between the truck and the tractor broke, and Alcorn’s sister, who was sitting on her dad’s lap, was crushed. “The force of the steering wheel crushed my dad’s ribs; he would’ve felt [my sister’s] bones crack.”

Alcorn says that her parents never discussed the incident. “At that point [my parents] disconnected from us emotionally. It was like living with roommates,” Alcorn says, trying to hold back the tears. “Nobody talked about it. There was always a sadness on [my father’s] face. When he died, he still had that look.”

I remember something a counselor friend once told me: We all try to redeem our childhoods. If Alcorn had a childhood in which problems and pain could not be discussed, it only makes sense that she would spend the rest of her life trying to help others address those very things.

Alcorn says she started going to counseling eight years ago, which gives her some relief from the weight of the responsibility she feels as head of a large ministry. She’s also discussed her family history with her counselor.

“I try to be real,” Alcorn says. “We’re all toast without the Lord. When we step down from this [ministry] platform, we have to walk it out just like everyone else. People are people; we all have to deal with stuff.”

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