

God's Amazing Grace

Once a drug addict and prison inmate, Lupe Dobbs now pastors her own church.

Forty-four-year-old Lupe Dobbs knows all about God's amazing grace. Whether it's preaching to her congregation or counseling substance abusers, the former drug addict, prostitute and prison inmate insists to anyone who will listen that only God can turn a life around.

"My past is what God has used to bring me to this point in life," Dobbs says.

From 1970 to 1989 Lupe lived in east Los Angeles and was in and out of jail, turning tricks on the street, and shooting up cocaine or some other drug. She was often homeless and lost her six children to foster care for several years.

Today the Assemblies of God minister, with the help of some of her children, is busy planting a church near her hometown of Eugene, Oregon. Her desire, she says, "is to reach the lost and disadvantaged of our community." Lupe also works at an area drug rehabilitation center, where for the last 12 years she has been a counselor and detoxification technician and more recently the housing coordinator.

"I was given a second chance," Lupe says.

HITTING ROCK BOTTOM

Lupe's Los Angeles childhood was far from a normal, happy one. Her father worked a great deal and wasn't home much with Lupe and her three sisters. Her mother was diagnosed with schizophrenia. "She just wasn't there for us, emotionally or mentally," Lupe says.

Lupe started experimenting with drugs and sex at age 13, but her involvement escalated through her teen years. At 16 she

was raped at gunpoint by a gang member.

"He threatened to kill me or my family if I ever told anyone," she says. It wasn't until 15 years later, when Lupe was going through healing and recovery in Eugene, that she dealt with what had happened.

She dropped out of high school at 17 when she found out she was pregnant. "My son, Ralph, was born when I was 18," Lupe says. "That's also the time when my family fell apart." Her mother was committed to a psychiatric hospital and her father left home, forcing Lupe's two younger sisters into foster care.

Lupe and her older sister parted company but years later ended up living together. Lupe had two more children: a daughter, Helen, born in 1978, and a son, Richard, born in 1979.

Lupe's sister eventually kicked Lupe and her children out, but they were taken in by neighbors who had a son, Charles. He and Lupe were soon sharing the same lifestyle of drugs and drinking and moved in together. Later they were married.

One time, after a heavy night of partying, Lupe got into a fight with a girlfriend. "I was hung over, and she was still drunk," Lupe says. "I ended up calling the police."

The police settled the squabble by arresting Lupe for child neglect of Ralph, 5; Helen, 2; and Richard, 1. "I've never forgotten that," she says, "getting arrested in front of my children. They were holding onto my leg, crying: "'Don't leave, Mama. Don't leave.'"

Her children were placed in foster care. During the next several years, Lupe regained custody, but most of the children, including baby Charles Jr., ended up living with a family friend. Richard was adopted.

"It was all downhill from there," Lupe says. In 1985 she and

Charles were arrested, and Lupe was sentenced to two years in the California state penitentiary.

A month into serving her time, in December 1986, Lupe accepted Christ after hearing of her husband's conversion and listening to other inmates witness to her. She got involved in a Bible study and helped form a choir. Lupe's sentence was reduced to 10-12 months.

As she eagerly awaited her day of freedom, the prison chaplain warned her to stay away from friends and family. "He told me I wasn't strong enough," she says. "He was right."

Upon her release Lupe went right back into the drug scene. In November 1987 another baby, Dorothy, was born. But doctors detected cocaine in her system, and the baby was taken from Lupe and placed in foster care.

At this point, Charles' father and an uncle approached the couple with two one-way bus tickets to Eugene, where a relative would help them get a job and get established.

They left Los Angeles in 1988, but life in Eugene was rough. The job didn't pan out, and they found themselves homeless.

In January 1989 Lupe, now pregnant with her sixth child, became deathly ill with pancreatitis and ended up in the hospital, where she was given morphine shots every four hours for the pain. The doctor's prognosis finally got Lupe's attention: "'Stop drinking and doing drugs,' he told me, 'or you and your baby will die,'" Lupe says.

A SECOND CHANCE

During the rest of her two-week hospital stay, she cried out to God. "I told Him I didn't want to die, and I didn't know what else to do."

God heard Lupe's prayers and immediately delivered her from drugs, alcohol and smoking. "I haven't touched any of that

stuff since then. It's been 13 years," she says.

By the time Cindy was born, Lupe and Charles were settled in an apartment. Remembering the prison chaplain's advice, Lupe got plugged into a church, Willamette Christian Center, right away. She also began to be mentored by an older, spiritually mature woman who could disciple her and hold her accountable.

Later that year, Lupe enrolled in a local community college and started work at Willamette Family Treatment Service, a drug rehabilitation center. By 1992 Lupe had an associate's degree in community service, and she and Charles had three of the children back from foster care: Ralph, who was now 16; Helen, 13; and, Charles Jr., 6.

In 1994, while Lupe was working on a bachelor's degree, Charles died suddenly of encephalitis. "We had just turned a corner in our marriage," Lupe says. "It was heartbreaking." But instead of turning to drugs or alcohol, Lupe turned to her church family, who rallied around her and her children.

After earning a bachelor's degree in interdisciplinary studies, Lupe pursued a master of divinity from Western Evangelical Seminary. She graduated in April 2000 and the following month became a licensed minister with the Assemblies of God. She also was approved by its home missions board to begin a church plant.

Her church, Maranatha Assembly of God, currently meets in leased office space in nearby Springfield, Oregon. Her congregation is small in number but growing quickly. Daughter Cindy, 12, and son Charles Jr., 16, are ushers, communion servers and nursery workers.

"They pray with me all the time," their mom says. "I've been very blessed. They really work hard to help out and support me."

Her two older children, 26-year-old Ralph and 23-year-old

Helen, live in the area and, according to Mom, “are so proud of me. They tell everybody what I do.” Dorothy, 14, lives with friends in California and visits often.

Besides handling her pastoral duties and working at the drug rehabilitation center, Lupe is involved in occasional prison outreaches. “I minister wherever God opens up the doors for me.”

“If you had told me when I was all messed up that I would one day be doing this, I would’ve looked at you like you were bonkers,” Lupe says. “It’s only by God’s grace that I am what I am.”

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