

# They Found His Mercy

Nancy Alcorn didn't just stand on the sidelines and watch troubled girls throw their lives away. She built them a refuge.

**MERCY MINISTRIES' HOME FOR TROUBLED YOUNG WOMEN IN NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE, BECOMES A HOUSE OF VICTORY ON GRADUATION DAY. STAFF MEMBERS, FRIENDS AND FAMILY GATHER TO CELEBRATE WITH THOSE WHO HAVE SUCCESSFULLY MADE IT THROUGH THE CHRIST-CENTERED REHABILITATION PROGRAM.**

On this particular day, three graduates share testimonies that reveal God's ability to change lives from the inside out. Their faces radiate joy, peace and freedom. No longer are they slaves to spiritual battles that once threatened to destroy them.

"When I walked in these doors, I wanted to die," says 29-year-old graduate Kari Jones. "I believed I would never be whole, but God has set me free completely."

Jones had battled an eating disorder since she was 13. Secular treatment programs didn't work; and by the time she checked into Mercy, she was also drinking heavily and sleeping in her car.

As the ceremony progresses, Jones and the two other graduates, Jennifer Blann and Charlotte Brown, receive uplifting words of affirmation from family members, friends and Mercy counselors.

Finally, Mercy founder Nancy Alcorn stands up to speak. "My

pet peeve is how the world tells us, 'Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic; once you have an eating disorder, you'll always have an eating disorder,'" says the 50-year-old blonde, who founded Mercy Ministries in 1983.

She emphasizes Christ's transforming power and says Mercy's mission is "to go to the world's trash can and dig out the treasure."

### **Coaching Women for Life**

A native Tennessean and huge sports fan, Alcorn has reached out to troubled young women since college. A serious knee injury kept her from playing sports on a collegiate level; however, for five years she coached young women in the "game of life" as an athletic director for Tennessee's correctional facility for juvenile delinquent girls.

As time passed, Alcorn became frustrated with the system. She wasn't seeing changes and thought she might see more results if she worked with younger children, so she asked for and received a transfer into the State Department of Human Services. She supervised foster-care placements in the Nashville area and then began to work with the Emergency Child Protective Services Unit, investigating charges of abuse and neglect.

Alcorn heard about Teen Challenge while working at Child Protective Services and began to do volunteer work for the organization. She saw how God's Word transformed people and renewed their minds, and the positive results gave her a sense of hope that she hadn't felt in a long time. In 1980, Alcorn accepted a full-time position to serve as the director of

women for Nashville Teen Challenge.

In 1982, some close friends of hers moved to Monroe, Louisiana. Alcorn went to visit them and discovered that the area had a huge need for a place like Teen Challenge. When she went back to Nashville, she couldn't stop thinking about the need.

Finally, she took her vision to the board of Teen Challenge. They liked the idea of establishing a home in Monroe and including an outreach to pregnant teens—but it wasn't part of their plan.

With Teen Challenge's blessing and a \$1,000 contribution from the organization, she left Tennessee on January 15, 1983, to launch a home in Monroe on her own. Initially, the impact of her decision overwhelmed her. "I was inundated with fear—I cried all the way through church my first Sunday there," she says.

Her fear was quickly replaced with indescribable peace. "I believe God dropped into my heart a gift of faith because from that point on, it never occurred to me that it wasn't going to work. It was just a matter of not quitting—of finding a way to do what everybody said couldn't be done."

Alcorn says God told her that if she followed three principles, He would always meet her ministry needs: (1) Give at least 10 percent of all incoming contributions to other ministries; (2) Take the women in free of charge so they would know her love for them was pure; and (3) Avoid state or federal funding.

Alcorn never worried about finding women in need. The more places she spoke about her vision, the more people began to line up for help.

Money trickled in, and Mercy Ministries was finally able to open its first home. Young women came into the program from all over Louisiana and other states. The biblical philosophy she had learned at Teen Challenge was unfolding before her eyes: The power of Christ can change a life.

In time, Alcorn wanted to expand and provide a home for unwed mothers. An official from the governor's office in Louisiana called and asked if she was interested in state funding. Although Mercy had a backlog of unwed mothers in need of help, she turned down the opportunity because she knew government funding could change the whole scope of the program.

But God saw the need and providentially seated Alcorn next to a wealthy businessman on an airplane flight. She told him about her ministry, and when they landed, he asked her for a brochure.

A month later the man called and said he hadn't been able to forget about Mercy Ministries. He explained that his mother had been raped and conceived him. If there hadn't been a place for her to go, he would have been aborted.

He went on to ask her how much money she needed for the new home. When she told him she needed \$150,000, he instantly said, "You've got it." He gave the money anonymously, with no strings attached.

In addition to financial help, Mercy received volunteer help

from people such as Sam Carr, pastor of Word of Life Center in Shreveport, Louisiana, and his wife, Becky, who helped place Mercy Ministries' first 60 babies in adoptive families.

A board member for Mercy Ministries, Carr says the main reason he got involved was because of the positive results. He believes every pastor, at one time or another, needs a place like Mercy Ministries for a troubled parishioner. "Obviously, Nancy doesn't take in women based on who or what church is supporting her; but if you are involved with a ministry like hers, I believe God will open the doors when you have a need."

### **A Christ-Centered Model**

In 1990, Alcorn felt God was calling her back to Nashville to establish a home. She moved and, for the next five years, traveled extensively to help raise funds for a facility to house 40 women. Her dream became a reality in November 1995 when a \$2 million facility was completed—debt-free. The neighboring ministry headquarters building was finished in June 2001.

Unlike state-run facilities, Mercy Home is warm and inviting. "We want to make the home really nice because when we tell the girls they are valuable and precious, we need to back it up with what we provide for them," she says.

Although Mercy Ministries does not receive government funds, it is licensed by the government and has to follow certain protocol. There is always a waiting list, and Mercy places a priority on women who are pregnant or in a life-threatening situation.

After her 13th suicide attempt, Tonya Williams entered the program in 1996. The difference between Mercy Ministries and other treatment facilities, she says, is that the staff views the Word of God as a higher standard.

Williams, whose brother, Grant Williams, is a football player for the St. Louis Rams, says her parents spent more than \$400,000 at numerous treatment facilities. At Mercy, she felt safe for the first time to receive and worship God, and gradually started to build trust.

Today, Williams says she is set free and wants to help other women facing battles. Though once told she would never be able to hold down a job or function in the real world, she is now an artist and business owner, and feels compelled to share what God has done for her.

Part of Mercy Ministries' effectiveness is related to its counseling model. Sherry Douglas, executive director of programs for Mercy Ministries, says the model consists of three key areas:

1. **Belief system:** The women work on identifying the lies they have come to believe about themselves and replacing them with the truth.
2. **Generational sins and patterns:** The women identify patterns of sin in the past generations of their families and then, through prayer, break those patterns, according to Galatians 3:13.
3. **Hurts and wounds:** The women focus on forgiving others who have hurt them and letting go of all bitterness. Once they have forgiven others, they can anticipate healing in those areas

where they have been wounded.

After receiving forgiveness for their sins, some women need to pray and trust God for demonic influences to be broken, Douglas says. However, she emphasizes that deliverance cannot be separated from the other components.

“Deliverance is not enough,” Douglas maintains. “This body you live in is your house. ... But unless you know how to take authority and stand in that authority for your own house, the devil is going to come back and possibly bring friends.”

Before a young woman graduates from the program (six months is the typical stay), she must line up an accountability partner in the city where she will live and establish a church affiliation. Douglas is confident that if a graduate stays in the Word, in prayer, in Christian fellowship and in church, she will make it when she re-enters society. “It doesn’t mean she won’t have a hard day or a fall, but she will know what to do if it happens,” she says.

### **International Opportunities**

Mercy Ministries opened its first overseas home in Sydney, Australia, in 2001. A second Australian home opened in 2003 in Queensland. Both homes are overseen by noted Australian worshiper Darlene Zschech and her husband, Mark.

Alcorn recently took her 22nd trip to Australia in a five-year period—this time to discuss details for a third home. In addition, Mercy is looking for property in New Zealand, with the goal of opening a home there in 2005.

Mercy Ministries also is renovating a home on 32 acres in St. Louis that was donated by Joyce Meyer Ministries. Other homes are in the works in the United Kingdom, Los Angeles and Houston.

About 130 women graduate from Mercy each year. Alcorn estimates that more than 3,000 women have graduated from the program since its inception. She is confident that opening more homes will help reduce the waiting list.

Currently, Mercy Ministries' annual U.S. budget is a little more than \$4 million. The actual cost for each participant is around \$150 a day—10 percent of what many other treatment facilities charge. "Some facilities charge over \$1,500 a day—it is big business," Alcorn says.

Linda Mintle, Ph.D., a Christian therapist who offers expert advice to Mercy Ministries, is amazed that the organization is able to provide its services at no charge, given the cost of mental health care today. She gives credit to Alcorn for her fund-raising and networking efforts, which keep her on the road about 40 percent of the time.

Singing group Point of Grace, which has supported Mercy Ministries for a number of years, invited Alcorn to join them at Girls of Grace conferences across the nation, beginning in 2002. The first event was held in Lakeland, Florida, where they hoped to attract 1,500 girls. Nearly 9,000 girls (grades 7 through 12) showed up.

"You could hear a pin drop when I spoke to those girls. They listened," Alcorn says. "Afterward, we had girls talking to us about abortion, pregnancy, eating disorders, sexual

abuse—everything.”

Three years ago, Alcorn’s close friend Sue Semrau, who serves as head coach of women’s basketball at Florida State University, challenged Alcorn to receive some counseling herself. “She told me, ‘You’ve sucked yourself into your work and are helping everybody else, but I think there are some things you need to take time to do for yourself,’” Alcorn says.

Semrau helped her see that too much of her identity was tied into Mercy. “God wanted to let me know, ‘You are My daughter, and if you didn’t do Mercy any more, I would love you just as much, and you would be just as valuable,’” Alcorn says. “I know this is my call for life, but I had to be able to identify who I was apart from Mercy.”

Counseling has helped Alcorn, who grew up in a family that didn’t deal with issues, begin to understand some of the reasons she reacts to certain situations in certain ways. She feels it is one of the healthiest things she has ever done.

“It has helped me to be able to say to my staff, ‘We’re all in process. If there is an issue in your life that comes up at some point, don’t be afraid to deal with it.’”

Today, Alcorn believes she has a much greater understanding about life, herself and loving others. She wishes there wasn’t a need for any more Mercy homes, but she knows that is not reality.

“The Bible is pretty clear that the darkness is going to get darker and that the light will get brighter,” she says. “The

good news is that 'where sin abounds, grace doth much more abound.'"

## **Finding Freedom from Eating Disorders**

Sherry Douglas, executive director of programs for Mercy Ministries, believes that every decade or so, one major addiction rises to the forefront. "Years ago, it was drugs. Then it was alcohol.

Now it's eating disorders," she says. "A little over 50 percent of women in the Nashville home have eating disorders, and that is pretty indicative of what's happening around the world."

Anorexia involves extreme weight loss due to self-starvation. This disorder typically begins in young people around the time of puberty. Bulimia develops when a person consumes large amounts of food and then gets rid of excess calories by vomiting, abusing laxatives, taking enemas or exercising obsessively.

Eating disorders kill up to 10 percent of their victims. To effectively deal with them, Mercy added a food and fitness director. When the young women go to recreation each day, this staff person monitors the participants' physical activity.

"If we have a girl who has been underweight because of an eating disorder, our food and fitness director will modify a program that works for her," Douglas says.

A young woman who has an eating disorder must provide medical

records when she comes into Mercy's program. The records must include her actual weight, goal weight and safe weight so that Mercy's staff can monitor her and even connect her with a local doctor.

For accountability reasons, those with eating disorders are required to sign in and sit in the living room for 30 minutes after breakfast, and an hour after lunch and dinner. This step helps keep them from going immediately to the bathroom to purge their food.

Linda Mintle, Ph.D., a Christian psychologist who started a program for eating disorders at Eastern Virginia Medical School, has provided Mercy Ministries with expert advice on this complex says dieting is one of the most common entrées into an eating disorder. However, an eating disorder is not about food.

"It has more to do with relationships and how you feel about yourself, how you deal with negative feelings, a lack of strong identity," says Mintle, author of *Breaking Free From Anorexia and Bulimia* (Charisma House).

Nancy Alcorn, founder of Mercy Ministries, admits that she battled bulimia years ago. It began when she was in college and lasted for five years.

"I read about what was going on with me in a book or magazine article," she says. "I thought I was just struggling with the fear of being fat—I didn't know it had a name."

Though Alcorn never took laxatives, she had a problem with bingeing and purging. "Finally, I cried out to God on one New

Year's Eve and said, 'Lord, I will not go into another year doing this,'" she says. "I had to surrender control and say, 'If I have to weigh 300 pounds, then so be it.'

"God told me to trust Him and use food as it was intended," she says. "I started listening to my body and let it talk to me."

Though free from bulimia, Alcorn remembers the pain of that bondage and is able to empathize with young women who struggle with it.

Melissa Thompson, 21, of Bedford, Iowa, battled an eating disorder for more than four years before checking into Mercy Ministries in Nashville. "I almost gave up hope before I got here," she says.

At Mercy Ministries, she found freedom and began to understand God's unconditional love. "I was a perfectionist, and performance was how I got accepted," she says. "I've learned to love myself because I'm God's creation, and I'm precious to Him."

Mintle offers several practical tips for those dealing with an eating disorder.

1. Admit you have a problem.
2. Admit you need other people to get involved in your care.
3. Develop your identity in Christ.
4. Learn how to deal with conflict in your family.
5. Learn how to express your opinions—to work through relationship difficulties without stuffing away your feelings.

For more information go to or

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Carol Chapman Stertzler, a Dallas-based journalist, attended a graduation ceremony at Mercy Ministries' Nashville, Tennessee, home in May. For information about Mercy Ministries log on to or call 615-831-6987.