

## Features

## A 'loving place' offers hope to defeat drugs' deadly lure

By Teresa A. Parsons

The women of Liberty Manor are a paradox. They are terribly charming, yet deeply disordered.

They are lifelong victims who become masterful manipulators.

They are indomitable survivors, yet many are doomed — some to repeat the cycle of drug dependence; others to fall victim to AIDS and other drug-related liabilities.

"This is very serious business — they're fighting against incredible odds to stay alive," said Claudia Hobbs, a former drug abuser who now serves as senior therapy assistant in the residential program for chemically dependent women and their children. Hobbs quickly lays out those odds for new arrivals, pointing out that two-thirds of them will most likely either die or remain drug-dependent.

She likens those who survive the scathing of chemical dependence to once-broken bones — stronger for the testing. "The hope for the heartbeat of our city comes from these individuals," she said. "The ones that do heal and make it are a phenomenal type of people."

From the first, planners at Restart Substance Abuse Services, a Catholic Family Center-affiliated agency, envisioned Liberty Manor as serving a most difficult population — women who are primarily dependent on drugs such as cocaine and heroin, and who are homeless or indigent.

When Liberty Manor opened last August, it was the only such residential program in the state outside New York City. "In the past, women received drug treatment less often than men," said Elizabeth Mandly, Liberty Manor's program director. "They weren't seeking treatment — maybe because the social stigma against women (who are chemically dependent) is more powerful."

Specifically, the former convent on Joseph Avenue accommodates as many as 15 women, 18 years or older, and up to five preschool-aged children. Women generally stay for six months,

participating in a highly regimented program that includes individual and group therapy, life-skill classes, recreational and educational activities, and volunteer community service.

Since opening, Liberty Manor has admitted 59 women — most referred from the criminal justice system through Restart's Criminal Justice Treatment Program — and 18 children. To date, 11 women have successfully completed the program.

Because Liberty Manor is relatively small, its program is more than usually adaptable to varying effects of different drugs, and to individual's personalities. Cocaine addicts have so far comprised more than 70 percent of Liberty Manor's residents. Physically, they may experience depression, confused thinking and lethargy for as long as a year after their initial withdrawal from the drug, according to Mandly. Psychologically, they are addicted to stimulation, and thus, easily bored.

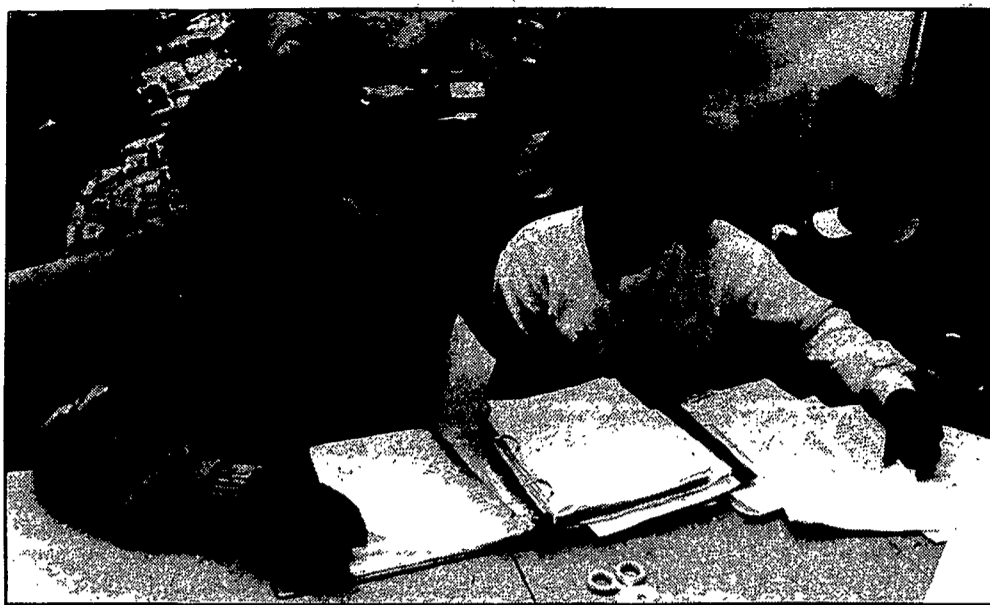
Such symptoms usually tend to wax and wane. Ironically, Mandly noted, the 28-day point at which many treatment programs end is quite often the point when cocaine addicts are hit with a second wave of physical symptoms.

Heroin addicts make up the second-largest group of Liberty Manor residents. Their most difficult challenge, Mandly said, is "the power of their addiction."

"They're very agitated and jittery," she explained. "They'll spend a lot of time looking out the window, and then one day they're gone."

For most of Liberty Manor's women, however, drug addiction overlays deeper problems — anger, self-hatred, despair. Between 85 and 90 percent have been prostitutes, according to one staff member. Many are HIV-positive — which means they carry the virus that causes AIDS. Many have also served time in prison.

Growing up in dysfunctional families, many were sexually abused — a pattern which often



Liberty Manor house coordinator Elois Copper (left) goes over some household accounting with resident Deborah Carr as Carr's six-year-old daughter, Marcella, looks on.

continues into adulthood. "They have no interaction skills or parenting skills, no capacity to develop healthy relationships, nor any idea of what they would mean," Hobbs said.

Others lack skills as fundamental as caring for their hair and appearance, ironing a shirt, cooking a nutritious meal or cleaning a bathroom sink. Some are illiterate, or have yet to reach high-school levels in reading or math, or are unable to organize and manage their time.

"I've been in the field 11 years, and this is the most dysfunctional population I've ever worked with," Mandly said.

Yet in spite of residents' low self-esteem, Hobbs noted, they often have a "magnanimous sense of false pride."

"They're like stray cats, used to coming and going as they please, taking what they want when they want it," she explained. "In terms of what's important, these people come here with survival attitudes."

Fear of not surviving is what often drives women to seek the kind of help Liberty Manor offers. Twenty-five-year-old Carol snorted cocaine and drank "morning, noon and night,"

yet never considered herself an addict. "I thought an addict was a bum out in the streets, shooting up," she said.

Then, after Carol and a friend devoted a long day to getting high, the friend collapsed on the kitchen floor, bleeding from the mouth and turning blue.

"I called 911. I thought I was on my way to prison," she recalled. "It scared me enough that I stopped — I wouldn't do (cocaine). I tried it once more, but I was scared. I thought it would happen to me."

Too frightened to leave her two young children with her often-abusive husband, who was still using cocaine, Carol endured withdrawal at home. "I kept going to the hospital when it got really bad, pretending something else was wrong," she said.

Finally, overcome by paranoia and delirium tremens, Carol called a taxi and checked into a local hospital's psychiatric ward. From the hospital, she entered an alcohol-treatment program. In the meantime, she battled and begged for admission to Liberty Manor, where she

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