

Women find freedom from addiction at Libertae

Regina Young

It doesn't take much to sum up the value of mothers to society. A 144-year-old saying coined by poet William Ross Wallace does the trick.

The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world.

So when those same hands are compromised by drug and alcohol addiction, "Just ignoring the problem is not going to make our society healthier," Connie Bastek-Karasow said.

Bastek-Karasow is the executive director of Libertae, a non-profit organization in Bensalem whose mission is to empower women and their families to maintain sobriety through comprehensive treatment programs.

What began in 1973 as a halfway house supporting women on their path to alcoholic sobriety, Libertae has evolved into an all-inclusive facility – complete with a family house – that provides both drug and alcohol addiction treatment as well as programs for co-occurring behavioral health disorders.

At the halfway house, which serves about 20 women 18 years of age and older, residents gain tools of recovery through individual and group therapy, addic-



Libertae recently cut the ribbon on a new 12-step walking trail at the center, which is in Bensalem.

tion education, 12-step meetings, health and nutrition education, relapse prevention, life skills education and other programs.

Women can stay at the halfway house for up to six months. Afterwards, women in need of housing can transition to Libertae's Crossroads program.

They may turn to chemical substances for various reasons, however, women who come to Libertae typically share a few common denominators: A history of abuse and a family cycle of addiction.

According to Bastek-Karasow, 98 percent of women who are treated at Libertae have experienced emotional, sexual or physical abuse before their addiction began or during it.

"People who are going to use drugs often either have it in their family history or [suffered] some abuse as a result of the addiction in their family," she said. "When they get to their adolescents and their teens, they start resorting to what they know."

A lingering social stigma – that those who suffer from addiction have failed, are bad or are somehow weak – inhibits many women from seeking help.

"The stigma and misunderstanding about addiction today as it relates to women is still a big problem and the biggest barrier to women coming for treatment," said Bastek-Karasow, who lost her own mother to alcoholism.

For mothers, the stigma has

greater implications.

"Women often won't come to treatment for fear of losing their children," Bastek-Karasow said.

"Very often, family members or people who care, mistakenly take it as a sign of weakness, not a sign of strength, that women would have the courage to come into treatment," she continued. "Because of that, they may make a move to take a child."

Libertae's family house accommodates women who may have up to three children 12 years old or younger. In an effort to break the cycle of addiction, children as well as their mothers receive therapy and drug and alcohol education.

The center also offers day care and prenatal services. Last year, 13 babies were born at Libertae.

Libertae is one of only about a dozen facilities statewide that provided access to treatment for expectant mothers and women with children, Bastek-Karasow said, adding that few housing options limit access to treatment, which puts families at greater risk for coming unglued.

"A lot of kids in foster care are there because their parents weren't intervened upon earlier in their addiction and it isn't until they lose the children that

they seek help," she said. "We need to be a lot better at assessing those issues earlier to better serve our children. Our children deserve a safe place to be and a healthy parent, and that's what we strive to do."

Economic woes have made that mission a little bit harder as Libertae has lost about \$30,000 in grant money in the past six months.

In addition to accepting monetary donations, Libertae has a wish list with needed items to help the women of Liberate get back on their feet. Goods needed include pots and pans, vacuum cleaners, diapers, linens, towels, sheets, pillows, clothing and furniture.

But perhaps what women of Libertae and others struggling with addiction need most is a change in public perception.

"They are not bad girls becoming good," Bastek-Karasow said. "These are women who are sick, who are becoming healthy. And if we can shift our focus and not be afraid of this disease, and gain knowledge and understanding, by definition our communities will get healthier."

For information, to volunteer or to donate to Libertae, visit liberate.org or call 215-639-8681.