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A Life Back On The Path

Michelle Freeman knows a city's mean streets first-hand.

Homeless and paroled from the California Institute for Women, Freeman had \$147 in her pocket and nowhere to go.

She was scared to death, she says.

Enter Kim Carter and Time for Change Foundation, a San Bernardino shelter offering support services to homeless women and their children in a clean, homestyle environment.

"If I had not entered into the pre-release program, I would never have heard about Kim's program. I wouldn't have known there were people out there fighting for me," Freeman says.

"She didn't know me, but she was fighting for me. Kim saved my life and gave me my life back."

Now a graduate of Time for Change, Freeman has turned her life around 180 degrees

She is a contributing member of society, giving back to help other women overcome the devastating effects of incarceration, abuse and neglect.

A mentor and board member of the Foundation, Freeman is among the 17 honorees at this year's League of Women Voters 2007 Citizen of Achievement Awards presentation, which will take place at the San Bernardino County Government Center.

As a person who has overcome incredible obstacles getting her life back on track to help others, Freeman offers this perspective:

Question: How does it feel to be selected for the Citizen of Achievement honor?

Answer: I'm still awed that they would consider me considering where I came from. I feel very honored and blessed that someone recognizes me for my positive contributions. As a graduate of Time for Change Foundation, we take the women in who come in broken and beaten down by society. We take them in and produce someone like me because when I came in I was pretty messed up myself. Today, I can give back what Time for Change has given me, which is love, direction. We mentor them in a 12-step program for their recovery. We teach them how to be ladies again – how to get back into society and interact with society positively. Yes, we came from homelessness, prisons, but this is what sober living, Time for Change has done for me. We make ladies of them.

Q: What was your darkest hour before getting to the place you are in now?

A: My darkest hour was when I was being released and had no idea that sober livings or recovery homes even existed – my darkest hour was going back out there. It's a dark hour when you don't know where your next meal is coming from. It's the blackness of hopelessness.

Q: What do you say to other women who are dealing with the devastating effects of incarceration, abuse and neglect?

A: When they come in, I tell them my story and that I've been there where they are, and how I'd been abusing for some 20 years. I never saw recovery in my future. I never thought I'd be sitting here like this talking positively with you. It changed me and if it changed me, it can change you, but you have to be willing to accept what's there. It means more hearing it from a person who's been there. If I'm looking at a person who's not been there, I'd ask, "What can you tell me?"

Q: Have Kim Carter and the Time for Change Foundation changed a lot of lives?

A: Absolutely. This is where the success stories come in. When I got out of prison, I was supposed to go to L.A. County, but I got to the gate and they told me that was not where I was going. I had nowhere to go. But I still had Kim's card on me so I called her and she actually answered the phone. There's no other sober living where you can go without your rent in your hands. What Time for Change signifies to me is that it's a safe haven. It's in a safe, quiet neighborhood – no drugs around. It's conducive to our recovery when we get out.

I can't imagine why public officials keep dumping money into failures and they see Time for Change and other sober livings that are successful, but they won't fund us or give us the resources we need. It's a shame when one of the girls wants to go to school or have their teeth fixed, we have to raise money and the city won't give us money that's there. We have to change that. The way it is now, when you have a felony, you can't get medical or finances to start on the right path and you can't get a job. We have to change that. We're making the women who are coming in more aware of social injustices. This program is proven to be successful.

Q: What would you say is the most important thing you learned while at Time for Change?

A: I had to first learn to love myself and that I was of value and worth something. That I could love and not be afraid and not be beaten down. That I can love freely and give back. Today, I am a trustworthy person, a lovable person. People can look at me and care for me unconditionally. When you're out there, you think people have an ulterior motive. I've learned to value myself.

Q: Is there one message you would like to get across regarding sober living facilities in our area like Time for Change?

A: The sober livings that are up and operational and successful need to remain up and operational. We need the resources and funding that public and private donors can give us because the women are coming daily. If they're not in a safe environment in the sober livings, they're going to be on your doorstep, in your parks – that's a guarantee. So why don't we get together and prevent this from even starting by providing us with the resources and funding we need to be operational so we can continue to help women coming out of prison. It's all about giving back and this is what we have to make public officials recognize. It's time we give back and stop saying let someone else do it – let the next administration handle it.
For more information about Time for Change Foundation, call (909) 886-2994.