

Belinda Speaks Wilson – From Turmoil to Transcendence

By Jayne Crisp, Greenville Mental Health Center

“The world breaks everyone, and afterward, some are strong at the broken places.”

Ernest Hemingway

The metamorphosis of Greenville, South Carolina’s downtown has been dramatic. Formerly high crime areas are being transitioned from violent drug infested hangouts to gentrified neighborhoods of thriving businesses, art studios and trendy restaurants.

This remarkable transformation is an analogy of the life Belinda Wilson, who for eighteen years lived a homeless and violent life as a prostitute and drug addict in one of Greenville’s most well-known high crime areas – the Pendleton Street/Anderson Road area. This was an area where the only safe passage through these neighborhoods was in a police car – day or night. But like Hemingway’s wise observation, Belinda’s resolve to become stronger at her broken places became a reality following thoughts of suicide and an early morning sunrise that gave her the hope that changed her life on those desperate streets of downtown Greenville



These were the same streets and alleys where Belinda earned her living to support her habits and addictions. Violent victimization, exploitation and homelessness became a part of her daily life and contributed to the traumatic and heartbreaking decisions she had to make for the safety of her children.

Belinda’s life didn’t start out filled with violence and turbulence. On the contrary, although her mother died at an early age, Belinda was raised with her five brothers and one sister by a caring grandmother with deep religious convictions.

Belinda's own life-long love of music inspired her to teach herself to play the piano and later earn a college degree in music at Newberry College. As one of the first few African American students initially invited to attend this historic Lutheran college, Belinda enthusiastically joined other students embracing the small but vibrant campus party life. And following graduation, Belinda taught music in Lee County (SC) public schools for three years to fulfill the obligation of her educational grants and scholarships.

She eventually returned to Greenville after a failed relationship that produced two sons. Her sadness and disappointment accompanied with the loneliness and the hurt of rejection motivated her to seek comfort in drugs that worked to kill the pain. But her use of cocaine and other drugs become more and more addictive over the years until she finally existed just to support her habit and lifestyle. She eventually lost her job, lost all her belongings and lost even herself to the Greenville drug culture.

Ultimately, Greenville's Soup Kitchen, South Carolina DSS, and other services for Greenville's transient and homeless populations, became all too familiar to Belinda whose lifestyle compromised the safety and security of her children. During her numerous times being incarcerated for drug related offenses in South Carolina and Georgia, for their own protection, Belinda voluntarily turned over her two sons to their father. And she also temporarily gave up her infant daughter to the South Carolina Department of Social Services for eighteen months.

After almost two decades on the streets, living in crack houses, abandoned homes and cars, Belinda and her two year old daughter checked into Serenity Place, a six month residential treatment facility of the Phoenix Center for pregnant women, and young women with pre-school age children. She had already made several attempts at maintaining a drug-free life, but in 2005 on the second try in residential treatment at Serenity Place, she graduated from the program resolving to not let the drug take control of her brain, her behavior, or her life.

Recently Belinda reflected, *"I had to be accountable and there was no room for mistakes. I had to be perfect, no sliding backwards. It was like I had to*

intentionally control my thinking each day. Because of the previous influence of drugs, my brain was working against me. Finally, my determination paid off and it was not that much of an effort as it was at first."

Today, after twelve years being drug free, Belinda marvels at the growth and conversion of her old dangerous neighborhood. And at the growth and conversion in her own life which she attributes to her strong faith and belief that her purpose on earth is not accomplished just yet.

Belinda does not find it a coincidence that as a peer support specialist, she is successfully providing guidance and direction to clients of the Greenville Mental Health Center who are affected by drug addiction, violence and mental illness.

Belinda is convinced that she survived her drug use and the chaos and brutality of the streets to help others make positive and healthy changes in the direction of their lives. This conviction accompanied by her deep faith and the love of her children, are the catalysts for her determination, her joy, and her dedication to helping others overcome significant challenges.

She also does not find it a bit unusual that she now finds strength and comfort in this very same neighborhood where she experienced such turbulence for so many years. She candidly admits proudly, *"Both my life and my neighborhood have been wiped clean and rebuilt for a higher purpose."* And she's right. Both the transformed neighborhoods of her past and the metamorphosis of her present and future are amazing works of grace in progress.

Belinda's life is now filled with gratitude and joy just waiting for another opportunity to make a difference in someone else's life as she continues to gain strength from her own (formerly) broken places, and as she helps others to find strength in theirs.

(Note: The Greenville Mental Health Center received written permission from Belinda Wilson to write and publish this article on this website.)