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Faces of Hope Daystar is More than a Safe Place to Stay; Transitional Living Center Helps Battered Women Regain Sense of Self, Strength

By Georgia Pabst, Staff, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Wanda Leak fingers the small scar above her eyebrow, a faint reminder of an abusive marriage she left five years ago.

After 17 years she had become good at making excuses for the injuries but then showed up at her job as a legal secretary with two black eyes. She was called into the human resources department and questioned about the shiners.

“I couldn’t find excuses for the black eyes,” she said. “I was lucky.”

The co-workers talked to her and gave her the phone number for Sojourner Truth House, a shelter for battered women. She stayed there for six weeks but needed to find another place to heal.

Leak, 53, discovered Daystar Inc., a transitional living center for women without dependents who have suffered domestic violence.

“Daystar was something I needed very badly at that time,” she said over lunch at a downtown restaurant. Among other women there, she found conversation and emotional support.

Counseling sessions on Saturday also helped.

Leak continued at her job, but for the next year, she lived at Daystar, working through pain and toward independence.

“Daystar helps you get the feeling of being your own person and not belonging to someone else,” she said. “You realize your own strength. You realize that you can make your own choices.”

Now Leak serves as secretary of Daystar’s board of directors.

Daystar was established in 1986 to help women without children who need a safe, quiet transition residence to heal and rebuild their lives. Most who come to Daystar are referred from

battered women's shelters. If unemployed, they must look for full- or part-time work, said Executive Director Mary Fran Willcoxson.

Residents are urged to pursue educational or job training programs as well.

On Saturday mornings women must attend a support group on domestic violence, and must attend a minimum of four other support or counseling sessions at other agencies.

Women can stay at Daystar for up to two years. The program takes up to 10 women at a time.

More than 300 have sought assistance from Daystar.

The program charges \$100 a month for the first six months; \$150 for each of the next 7-12 months; and \$200 a month for 13 to 24 months. Grants from the city, foundations and religious orders help fund Daystar and its programs, Willcoxson said.

Leak said she's seen many improvements at Daystar, from repairs and renovations to the building to computer training.

Leak said she has rebuilt her own life as well.

She's still a legal secretary, but with a different firm. She has her own apartment and two loving cats. She belongs to a Romanian folk dance group and a singing group.

Looking back on the years of abuse, she remembers: "You can get good at seeing what you want to see. You think there is something you can do, but there never is."

"Faces of Hope" focuses on people in the Milwaukee area who need a hand and the agencies that are helping them. Ideas? Call: (414) 224-2318; e-mail: hope@journalssentinel.com

NAME: DAYSTAR INC.

Mission: To enable and to empower women who have been battered to establish economic and emotional stability in a long-term, secure residential setting.

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