

Tucson Citizen

Denogean: Women's center needs a miracle of its own

[ANNE T. DENOGEAN](#)

Published: 12.02.2008

Tucsonan Danielle Schefs had a 25-year addiction to methamphetamine and marijuana and a lifetime of pain to show for it.

When she finally got sick and tired of being sick and tired, she got herself detoxed and then sought the help she needed to stay clean for good from Tucson's Miracle Center.

"The Miracle Center offered me a relationship with Christ. It offered me my self-esteem back, my confidence, my ambition, my willingness to live a sober life," Schefs said.

For the past six years, Miracle Center has helped troubled women make wondrous changes in their lives. Now, it needs the public's help to keep up the good work.

The center provides long-term transitional housing to women coming out of drug treatment, just released from prison or breaking free from a domestic violence situation. It pays the bills with the nominal rent it charges and revenue from its thrift stores at 5527 E. Pima St. and 2901 E. Broadway.

Revenue from the two stores has dropped about 50 percent over the last eight months, forcing the center in October to close one of the two houses it operates, said Pat Lutz, executive director of Miracle Center.

The center wants to raise sufficient funds to reopen a second house or move into one space large enough to accommodate up to 20 women.

Miracle Center was founded by Tucsonan Bettie Smith, who retired earlier this year. In the late 1990s, Smith served as chaplain at a shelter for women and children in crisis. She saw that women needed more than just a month or two in a safe place to turn their

lives around.

She envisioned creating a place where women could live for an extended time and find help in freeing themselves from substance abuse, clearing up any legal situations, restoring broken family relationships, finding employment and building a relationship with God.

When friends learned of her dream, they started donating items to fill a house for the women. The stuff soon filled Smith's garage, but she still didn't have the money for a house.

Then it came to her. She would open a thrift store to sell the donated items to raise the money.

The first store opened in June 2001. Ten months later, Miracle Center moved its first group of women into a home in central Tucson. It opened a second home in September 2005 and the second store in September 2006.

Miracle Center provides housing and counseling for up to two years. Lutz estimated 80 women have used the center's services since 2002. About 40 percent were graduated from the program and continue to do well. Another 20 percent report they are staying clean, though they left before completing their individual programs.

"A lot of agencies can get them detoxed, but that doesn't help if you don't do much to get them changed from the inside out," Lutz said.

At Miracle Center, a nonprofit, faith-based facility, the women go to counseling twice a week and a 12-step meeting and Bible study once a week. They must attend a church of their choice on Sundays. They don't start paying rent until six weeks into the program, giving them time to find a job. They pay \$400, which covers their food and all the services they receive. Because of current economic circumstances, the center is raising the rent to \$500.

Schefs, 39, is one of Miracle Center's many success stories.

She started using marijuana when she was 13 and gradually moved on to cocaine and methamphetamine. She dropped out of school in the eighth grade but later earned her GED and completed some community college classes.

She worked at a variety of jobs, managing to support herself and her addictions with her own money. But she was surviving day to day, not living.

"Life like that was no longer fulfilling or exciting or rewarding or fun. It was miserable," Schefs said.

The turning point came when Schefs learned her teenage daughter was pregnant. Schefs couldn't bear the thought of repeating the same mistakes as a grandmother that she made as a mother.

On Feb. 16, 2004, she turned herself into a detox center and stayed five months. Though the center offered her many tools for sobriety, Schefs felt she needed more. She entered Miracle Center in August 2004 and graduated in November 2005.

Schefs married two years ago, something she said would have been impossible before with the misery in her life. She has become a loving grandmother and healed her relationship with her daughter. She is employed as manager of Miracle Center's Broadway store.

Miracle Center "gave me the tools to better deal with life circumstances that suck and handle them accordingly, rather than just 'using' and burying them," Schefs said.

Melissa Goularte, a senior adult probation officer with Pima County, refers women to Miracle Center and has high praise for it.

The center provides a "very loving, nurturing" home, she said. The houses rented by the Miracle Center are "absolutely beautiful," she said, noting that many of the women have never before lived in a clean, pretty place.

"It's a really good program. . . . I've seen women's lives transformed and broken women become unbroken, fixed, through this program," she said.

Miracle Center isn't affiliated with any church, so it doesn't have a larger organization to turn to when times are tough.

Cash donations would be welcome (call 327-1208 to donate).

But helping the center can also be as painless as donating clothes and furniture that you no longer need or shopping at one of Miracle Center's stores.

Anne T. Denogean can be reached at 573-4582 and adenogean@tucsoncitizen.com. Address letters to P.O. Box 26767, Tucson, AZ 85726-6767. Her columns run Tuesdays and Fridays.