

Support from Amethyst House essential to recovering addicts



Editor's note: This story is the first in a weekly series that will highlight the work of the 25 United Way of Monroe County nonprofits. United Way is in the midst of its annual campaign, which has a fundraising goal of \$1.3 million. Find out more at monroeunitedway.org.

Aycen is an “Amethyst baby.”

The 1-year-old was almost born into a very different life. Nine months pregnant, his mother, Nicole Gehl, sat in the Orange County Jail after being arrested for dealing methamphetamine. At that time, she was still an active drug user.

“I wanted out,” Gehl said. “I wanted to stop, but I couldn’t.”

Gehl, like most of the women in Amethyst House’s residential program, had hit “rock bottom,” as case manager Kaitlin King puts it. The women seeking shelter and services at the Women’s House are usually involved in the legal system. Like Gehl, they come straight from jail or prison. The women are homeless, pregnant or injection drug users.

“Often, they are all three,” King said. “That’s the thing with addiction. It’s a disease that knows no bounds. It can affect anyone.”

Another jail inmate told Gehl about the nonprofit agency, which offers residential and outpatient addiction recovery treatment and therapy. On June 2, 2014, she moved into the five-bedroom house near downtown Bloomington. Amethyst House does not publicize the location of its residential houses for privacy reasons.

Only a few weeks later, Aycen was born.

“I had absolutely nothing to get ready for this baby,” Gehl said.

Amethyst House, which is a United Way agency, was able to provide Gehl with diapers and formula for her newborn. Her caseworker connected her to the Crisis Pregnancy Center, where Gehl was assigned a doula to help prepare for giving birth. And at the house, Gehl met Missy Sowders, and the two would remain close as members of the Amethyst House alumni network.

“I am so very close to that baby. He’s like a nephew of mine,” Sowders said. “I still see him today.”

Over the past six months, former residents of Amethyst House’s men’s and women’s houses, recovery group members and other program graduates have begun meeting regularly and planning events to support one another while in recovery. They call themselves “alumni,” but people currently in recovery treatment at Amethyst House also are able to participate.

“It’s family for me,” Gehl said. “I can’t just walk away from it.”

Recovering addicts succeed in their sobriety through the structure of a setting like the Women’s House or by participating in 12-step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous, said Mark DeLong, executive director of Amethyst House.

Teaching coping tactics to people in recovery that keep them from continuing to abuse substances, as well as providing healthy and fun recreation opportunities for those who have graduated from recovery programs, is necessary to continue that success.

“Relearning how to live and enjoy life is a key to sobriety,” DeLong said.

The alumni have organized boating and innertubing trips, hikes, cookouts and canoe trips at Griffy Lake. The group of 15 to 20 recovering addicts also created a presentation to show before a concert tonight to benefit Amethyst House.

The outings are an opportunity for people like Gehl and Sowders to stay connected and stay positive about their futures. Gehl moved out of the Women’s House earlier this year, and still participates in outpatient treatment and case management through Amethyst House. Sowders, who has lived in the house for 10 months, plans to stay at least until April, when she finishes her drug court program.

At picnics, vigils and other outings with the alumni, Gehl said she can thank the women in the house who helped her on her recovery path, and prove to women like Sowders that living a drug-free, financially independent life is possible.

“It shows the women in the house it does work,” she said.

Being in the alumni group and participating in activities is special for another reason, Sowders said.

“You get to remember things that happened,” Sowders laughed. “It’s awesome to be able to do those things sober. It’s a totally different feeling.”

Concert tonight

Americana singer-songwriter Justin Townes Earle will headline the third annual Amethyst House benefit concert tonight. The concert starts at 7 p.m. at the Buskirk-Chumley Theater. Bloomington folksinger Tim Grimm will also perform.

Tickets cost \$25 for upper balcony seats, \$35 for main floor and lower balcony seats, and \$80 for the VIP pit section. All proceeds will benefit the United Way agency.

Townes Earle is also a recovering addict, which Amethyst House staff say makes him a model performer.

“We like that our clients can see someone on stage that has been through what they’re going through,” said Niki Angelaki, clinical director for Amethyst House.