

Grads of respected recovery program reunite

BY T. KEVIN WALKER
THE CHRONICLE

At an age when most boys are chasing basketball balls and girls, Jeff Griffin was in hot pursuit of his next high.

He began experimenting with alcohol when he was just 12. By the time he was a teenager, he was officially an alcoholic. His substance abuse problem grew as he did.

"I was into anything that would get me high," Griffin, long sober, said recently.

Crack had become his drug of choice by his mid-20s. It was during that time that Griffin also realized that he needed help. He and a dozen others with severe drug problems turned to Prodigals Community, a faith-based substance abuse program with roots that stretch back to the mid-1980s. Griffin was among the first crop to enter Prodigals' New Salem program, an intense

recovery regiment that teaches personal responsibility, job skills and does out equal amounts of spiritual guidance and tough love. It was the early 1990s and New Salem marked a new chapter for Prodigals, which before had focused its recovery efforts inside of local correctional institutions and at a halfway house it operated for ex-offenders. New Salem participants live at a house run by Prodigals on Waughtown Street for up to 15 months. Griffin was one of the original 12 in New Salem.

He and other New Salem grads had a reunion of sorts on March 25 at St. Paul's Episcopal Church. They dined, laughed and reminisced about the long road they had each traveled. The event marked the 10-year anniversary of the Prodigals Community Alumni Association.

Griffin, now in his 40s and clean for more than a decade, said he not only discovered

sobriety at Prodigals but faith as well.

"I had never been a person who believed until I went there," said Griffin, who said that the spiritual basis of the Prodigals' program makes it successful.

Harriet Rhodes was one of four women in the very first New Salem class. She admits that the highly-structured program was a tough pill to swallow for someone who wasn't used to structure or discipline.

"I was 41-years-old. It was very hard for anyone to tell me when to wake up and to make up my bed. It was tough," she said. The tough-love has paid off for Rhodes and many other program graduates. Rhodes, a volunteer coordinator for a nonprofit agency, said there are several New Salem graduates who are business owners, homeowners, college graduates and productive members of society.

Jeff Coppage served as direc-

tor of Prodigals during New Salem's first years. He said those who successfully completed the program truly wanted to change. Unlike other recovery programs, New Salem is voluntary.

"We thought it was important that people choose this on their own, without having a court order them to do this," he said.

The New Salem program is still alive and as popular as ever. Alumni of the program have not let themselves become strangers. They provide inspiration, guidance and encouragement to the

men and women currently fighting their demons. Demand is much more than the help that Prodigals can provide. The agency gets from 50 to 80 applications a month from substance abusers eager to enter New Salem. But space and resources are limited.

Like most nonprofits, Prodigals has had its share of funding crises. Program participants provide a huge chunk of the agency's operating costs through their participation in an in-agency jobs program that pro-

vides landscaping, painting and other services. Local churches have also been good to Prodigals over the years. Don Moore, the agency's current executive director, is hopeful that Prodigals' best days are ahead of it and that the success stories will continue to be numerous and inspiring.

"We are very optimistic at this point," he said.

For more information on Prodigals Community, visit www.prodigals.org.



Former director Jeff Coppage (left, rear) with four of the New Salem program's first grads: Harriet Rhodes (front, left), Elaine Dessel, James Asbury (back, right) and Jeff Griffin.



Jacquelin Thomas poses with members of the New Vision Writers Group.

Thomas

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"I wanted to show that they still have the same issues that we have, but God is the answer," said Thomas. "And that's really a good thing, because through the trials of my life, God has been the one to bring me out."

In all, Thomas has penned 27 novels. Her Christian titles include "A Change is Gonna Come," "Soul Journey" and "The Prodigal Husband." "Defining Moments," a sequel to "The Prodigal Husband" made its debut at the weekend book festival. By the end of this year, she'll release four new titles, including "Simply Divine" slated for release in November. That book will send her into a new direction - young adult Christian Fiction.

According to Thomas, who lives in Durham with her husband and three children, writing is in her blood. Thomas says that her mother, Marian Thornton, was a closet writer. Thomas said her mother could write her under the table, but her mother refuses to publish any of her personal writings. Her father, Roger, turned all of Thomas' books into screenplays. Thomas' cousin, Maxine Billings, writes for BET Books.

When she is not writing, Thomas stays busy. She serves as a mentor for New Vision Writers Group, which is made up of up-and-coming writers. Members come from all over North Carolina to attend the group's monthly meetings. A few members, such as Stacy Hawkins Adams, have had publication success. Adams' second novel, "Nothing But the Right Thing," made its debut doing the festival as well. She spoke highly of



Jacquelin Thomas received flowers, an award and standing ovation at last weekend's book festival.

Thomas' mentoring skills, saying that Thomas was an inspiration before she even knew who Thomas was.

Thomas also hosts the annual Faith-Based Arts Conference every June to introduce Raleigh and other surrounding areas to other authors who pen Christian books. Those that will be taking part in this year's festivities include Tia McCollors and Pat George Walker.

"God has blessed me, so it is my job to give back when I can," Thomas said.

Thomas also serves as president for Faith-Based Literary Event Inc., an event planning company that does release parties for authors.

While Christian fiction is her genre, Thomas said when she picks up a book to read, she likes variety.

"I just love a good book," Thomas said when talking about her writing influences. She's an avid reader, enjoying everything from Shakespeare to murder mysteries, even science fiction.

Thomas' advice to those who want to become successful authors: just do it.

"Put pen to paper," she said. "To be a writer, you have to write."

Joseph Dixon, the founder and coordinator of the N.C. Black Book Festival, said Thomas was chosen for the award because of her tremendous success and immense talent. Thomas was impressed with Dixon's work as well. The festival drew hundreds of people. Thomas said she is already looking forward to next year's festival.

"The great thing about this festival is there are a lot of self-published authors here that may normally not be heard of unless they came to your town or by word of mouth, but this is a great debut for them. It's a great venue for self-published authors," she said.

For more information on Jacquelin Thomas, log onto www.jacquelinthomas.com.

BestHealth

Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center

April 2006 Events

Events are held at BestHealth in Hanes Mall or area YMCAs. Registration required unless otherwise noted.

To register, call Health On-Call® at 336-716-2255 or visit www.besthealth.com.

To become a BestHealth member, call 336-765-8804 or visit our web site.

18 TUE - Occupational Therapy: Life Skills

11 a.m. Meet WFUBMC occupational therapists, learn what they do and experience some of the equipment and tasks they use to help patients with daily life skills.

19 WED - Knowing What to Say

2 p.m. Retired minister and BestHealth member Claxton Hall presents ways to talk to those who've experienced a loss.

19 WED - Take it To Heart

5:30 p.m. Learn ways to be heart healthier during this two-hour program that features a cardiac nurse, nutritionist, exercise physiologist, and pharmacist. Sponsored by the WFUBMC Heart Center.

20 THU - Understanding Your Medical Bills

1 to 4 p.m. Bring all unpaid medical bills and insurance statements for a private meeting with WFUBMC Patient Financial Services retiree Margot Searcy. Learn how to better understand and organize the paperwork. Appointment required.

20 THU - Can Heart Surgery Affect the Brain?

4 p.m. WFUBMC cardiothoracic surgeon Dr. John Hammon explains how coronary artery surgery can cause cognitive loss in some patients.

21 FRI - Aerobics of the Mind

3 p.m. Join WFUBMC recreational therapist Carolyn Austin for this fun, interactive workshop and learn ways to improve brainpower and enhance memory. For BestHealth members only.

21 FRI - Stress Incontinence in Women

6 p.m. Stress incontinence is an involuntary loss of urine that occurs during movement such as coughing or exercising. WFUBMC gynecologist Dr. Samuel Lentz explains how medical advances are improving treatment and outcomes.

25 TUE - Belly Dancing

6 to 8 p.m. Learn how to belly dance from instructor Paula Stump. Dress in comfortable clothes to participate.

26 WED - Diabetic Delights

3 p.m. Chef Penny LaBrecque shares recipes and samples of healthy treats for diabetics and their families.

26 WED - All About Autism

6 p.m. Learn from WFUBMC pediatrician Dr. Kurt Klinepeter how autism affects individuals differently, making early diagnosis and specialized intervention crucial.

27 THU - Advance Directives

1 p.m. Learn how advance directives, such as a living will and healthcare power of attorney, can ensure that your wishes will be met. Free notary service.

27 THU - Your Face, Only Better

6 p.m. WFUBMC otolaryngologist Dr. Neal Goldman discusses surgical and non-surgical options that may improve your appearance.

28 FRI - A Diagnosis of Diabetes

11 a.m. WFUBMC Diabetes Care Center Educators Kathie Cooper and Donna Kernodle discuss diabetes, healthy lifestyle changes, and healthy meal ideas to please your taste buds.

28 FRI - Craving Creativity?

6 p.m. Creativity facilitators Janet Fox and Tim Binkley present the principles and tools of The Artist's Way, a plan for overcoming obstacles to artistic expression.

29 SAT - CPR for Family & Friends

12 to 3 p.m. Learn CPR for adults, children and infants from BestHealth staff nurse Lonnie Clark. Free. Cannot be taken for professional certification.

YMCA Locations



17 MON - Headaches & Neck Problems

11:30 a.m. WFUBMC physical therapist Penny Johnson explains causes of and treatments for headaches and neck problems, plus simple exercises to ease the pain. Davie Family YMCA.

18 TUE - This Is Your Brain on Caffeine

6:30 p.m. Dr. Luke Burnett, WFUBMC Radiology Research Fellow, talks about caffeine's effect on the body and brain and how the level of use affects brain activity. Central Family YMCA.

25 TUE - Oh, My Aching Knees!

6:30 p.m. Learn the causes of knee pain, available treatments, and options for avoiding surgery from chief physician's assistant Frank Caruso of WFUBMC Orthopaedic Surgery. Stokes Family YMCA.

Other Locations

20 THU - Arthritis - What You Need to Know!

1 p.m. Find out from WFUBMC nurse manager JoAnn Fahey the differences in arthritis and how people can help themselves. Senior Services Center, 2895 Shorefair Dr.

22 SAT - Heart and Sole 5K Run and 1 Mile Walk

4th of July Park, Kernersville
8:30 a.m. - 1 mile Walk begins
9 a.m. - 5K Run begins

27 THU - Senior Services Center Open House

1 to 4 p.m. Join BestHealth in celebrating the opening of Winston-Salem's new Senior Services Center, 2895 Shorefair Drive, with screenings, exhibits, tours and food.

To register for events, receive general health care information, or to schedule a physician appointment, call: Health On-Call® at 716-2255 or 800-446-2255.

Unless otherwise stated, BestHealth programs are for adults; no children under age 12, please.



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MEDICAL CENTER