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Transition facility in Bradenton gives inmate a new start

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MANATEE -- On Christmas Eve 1998, Dianna Love was driving home drunk and struck a 1996 Jeep Eagle, killing a 20-year-old woman and injuring the driver.

After 10 years in state prison, Love was transferred to Bradenton Bridge, a women's transition and work release facility.

At Bradenton Bridge, Love found a job, discovered that the murder of her teenage brother triggered her drinking problem and got a second chance at life.

The Florida Department of Corrections had threatened to shut down the center this month because of budget cuts. But after an agreement between Bridges of America, the facility's operator, and the Florida Department of Corrections, it will remain open.

If the program had closed, all 120 nonviolent inmates housed at Bradenton Bridge would have gone back to prison.

"Doing this program changed my life," Love said.

Hitting a brick wall

Before the accident, Love, 42, was a secretary at her father's trucking company in Polk County.

The night of the accident, Love was drinking liquor at a holiday party. When she left, Love says, she felt sober.

"I just thought that I had control," she said. "So I really thought that I could handle it."

It was a foggy night. Love made a left turn and felt like she had hit a brick wall.

The hood of her Ford Explorer was mangled. When she got out of the car, her ankle snapped. Doctors would later tell her she broke her left ankle, right arm and left collarbone.

She crawled away from her car, never seeing the other vehicle behind it.

At the hospital, Florida Highway Patrol troopers told her a woman in the other car had been killed.

"And that was the moment my life changed," Love said, crying. "I would never hurt anybody. And the thought of that, something I did took someone else's life, was a very tragic thing for me."

Tasha Fay Caudill, 20, was dead. She was the passenger in the Eagle. The driver of the car was injured.

Love was convicted of DUI manslaughter and DUI causing serious bodily injury in 2000. She was sentenced to 14 1/2 years in state prison and five years probation.

Love served 10 years before applying for re-entry services. She qualified for pre-work release based on the time she had left on her sentence and her history of clean behavior.

One in 10 inmates who complete a Bridges of America program will return to prison in three years, compared to four in 10 inmates who don't complete a re-entry program, according to the organization.

"I knew it was time for me to change," Love said.

Going to Bradenton Bridge

In 2010, Love arrived at the Bradenton Bridge, a three-dorm facility on 10 acres at 2104 63rd Ave. E.

She got off the bus and looked around. No guards. No fences. Someone handed her about \$3 to call her family.

"Uh-uh, I ain't touched money in 10 years," Love said, thinking it was a setup.

The center is divided into two sections: transition and work release. During the transition phase, inmates complete 1,000 hours of courses, said Bradenton Bridge facility director Felishia Dexter.

During the work release phase, inmates work outside the center -- businesses include a hair salon and an infrared optics business -- and take more classes in the evening. Courses include budgeting, family development and employability.

The program usually takes between several months to a few years to complete.

Thirty people, including four counselors, work at the facility, which opened in 2005.

Several trips to Wal-Mart are made every week. Sometimes, the women go to Goodwill for clothes and other items.

Love remembers her first trip to Wal-Mart. She firmly gripped the handle of a cart as she controlled her panic of being in an open space.

"It was really overwhelming," she recalls.

Inmates, who call each other "sisters," also have to take a substance abuse processing class, which helps them deal with the after-effects of their addictions -- including drugs and gambling -- throughout the entire program.

At Bradenton Bridge, Love said, she accepted her alcohol problem. During football games, weddings, family gatherings, she had been drinking.

"There was always a cooler with alcohol somewhere," she recalls.

On the night of the accident, Love's blood-alcohol level was more than twice the state's legal limit of .08 at the time.

With the help of her counselor, Ruth McLaughlin, Love realized she drank to drown her grief over losing her little brother.

When she was 16, Love's 14-year-old brother was shot dead inside their home by a friend. She began to drink with friends. Beer was her beverage of choice.

"I used alcohol to suppress my feelings," Love said. In Bradenton Bridge, she vowed never to touch it again.

After that, Love flourished in the program, McLauchlin said. Love is a dorm captain, took a DUI class at the State College of Florida, and told her story at DUI drug court.

"Dianna has improved to a level that's just unbelievable," McLauchlin said. "She's going to make it."

Love began working at Custom Climate Concepts, an A/C installation, repair and maintenance business in Sarasota, nearly a year ago.

She's a telemarketer, dialing about 800 phone numbers a day, and rides a bike to work.

Rodney Rupert, owner of Custom Climate Concepts, has been hiring women from Bradenton Bridge for about three years. Right now, Love and four other Bridge inmates work there.

"I believe in second chances for everybody," Rupert said. "They've been gone so long. ... they're so happy to be out and working somewhere."

When Custom Climate Concepts received the news that the facility wouldn't close, employees hugged and cheered for the women as they walked in to work the next day.

"I'm treated like a human being," Love said.

A new beginning

On May 31, Love will complete her prison sentence. She hopes to move back to Polk County, help out in the family business and pursue a career as a paralegal.

Love also hopes to find Tasha Caudill's family and make peace. She keeps a photograph of Tasha inside a photo album.

"The real desire of my heart is to tell my story," Love said. "Her death is not going to be in vain."

-- Information from the Lakeland Ledger archive stories was used in this report.

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