

Magdalene, Inc.

A healing community in Nashville

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [November 3, 2009](#) issue

Gwen opens the circle session at nine a.m. on a Monday morning with a reading from Alcoholics Anonymous' Blue Book. The theme is powerlessness, and Gwen reads in a halting voice. Her audience is a group of women who've come to work here in an old parsonage just up the hill from a well-heeled Episcopal church. In contrast to the church's imposing white-bricked structure, their small building has a battered front door, few furnishings and shabbily framed calligraphy that advises: "Live and Let Live," "Easy Does It" and "But for the Grace of God."

Many of the women paused on the porch for a cigarette before they came inside. They look tired, as if getting up on this Monday and getting to work took some courage. One woman says to no one in particular, "I almost didn't come today. I almost took a personal day so I could stay in bed."

Gwen, in her mid-30s, wears her hair pulled back in a ponytail. Like the other women here, she is in recovery from a life of drug addiction and prostitution. "I've really been struggling, y'all," she says, and then tells the women the exact nature of her struggle. Gwen has set a tone of honesty and simplicity, and each woman contributes until the circle is complete and the workday begins.

These women work for Thistle Farms, the business wing of Magdalene, Inc., an organization that helps women who are ready to make a life for themselves off the streets. Located in Nashville, Tennessee, Magdalene provides women who have a criminal history of prostitution and drug addiction two years of financial support and recovery opportunities. After six months in the program, the women can work at Thistle Farms. Here they make candles, lotions, lip balms and other beauty products from natural ingredients and essential oils. They sell their products through house parties and other community events where the women tell their stories and share their creations.

At the business meeting that follows the sharing time, the women report on events at which they have represented Thistle Farms over the weekend. Tonya, a fiery young woman, is the most exuberant. She made her first solo presentation at the city's children's hospital and is bursting with pride about it. "I did so good, y'all," she says with a grin.

After the meeting, the women transform the open room into a manufacturing center. Folding chairs and tables appear. Some women go over paperwork from the events. Others check inventory; a few gather to discuss a Mother's Day promotion and a new product that they're introducing. Some women work on computers in another room where they may be completing a GED or taking an online class. At a rickety table near a window, Tonya, Demetria and Tracey use Clorox wipes to remove excess wax and fingerprints from new lavender candles, then label and store them.

In a side room, Jordan is preparing another batch of candles. Peggy sits at a table with a box of tea tree and mint lip balms, and I join her. We work together for a few minutes in silence, gently wiping the tubes of lip balm and putting them aside. Peggy tells me that she's celebrating two years of sobriety and that getting clean was a very long process with a lot of false starts. She found her way to Magdalene thanks to a woman she met when they were in jail together. "When I saw her, she looked good, and I asked her about it. She told me about Magdalene. I thought 'If she can do it, I can do it.'" Now Peggy has six months left in the residential treatment program and is trying to find an apartment and a job that can support her—two difficult tasks for a woman with a criminal record, no matter how successful her recovery.

"You just have to put it in God's hands," she tells me. "It's like Gwen said, 'You just have to wait on the Lord.'"

Magdalene offers something rare in rehabilitation centers: two full years for recovery. Residents attend sobriety meetings, both in their houses and in the community, and they live communally without residential staff. They receive medical, dental and psychological care and can take advantage of educational opportunities and support for various legal predicaments. The women also open personal savings accounts, and Magdalene makes a deposit in each account, as well as providing a small stipend for things like Diet Coke, cigarettes and nail polish.

More than 70 women have graduated from the Nashville-based program since its inception, and Magdalene houses have been started in other communities, notably Charleston, South Carolina, and Chattanooga, Tennessee. Recovery relapses are common, but with Magdalene's open-door policy, women can come and go as often as it takes for them to get well. Currently, Nashville's Magdalene supports 21 women in three houses with a 66-woman waiting list.

Most of the meetings are held at the largest of the three houses, the Lena House, and the women call it their "mansion in the 'hood." With the help of donors, Episcopal priest and founder Becca Stevens built the house as a place that would be ideal for communal living. Although it is located in a neighborhood infected by drugs and violence, Lena House is an oasis of peace. The house has a beautiful courtyard with flowering trees and a garden. The kitchen has granite countertops and two refrigerators. The women spend a good deal of time on the front porch, where they are a visible witness to transformation and healing.

"All Magdalene does," says Becca Stevens, "is give women the opportunity to speak their truth in love." Stevens started Magdalene in 1994 after visiting homeless shelters and jails. "The system is failing women," she argues. "And it perpetuates the myth that there is something glamorous about women selling their bodies. There is nothing glamorous about what these women have been through." Women come into the program with scores of arrests. They have scars, meth-ruined teeth and poor health. Without exception, every woman in the program has experienced sexual abuse. Stevens says that sexual abuse is the starting place of nearly every problem that Magdalene women face. "When I started Magdalene," Stevens says, "I asked myself, 'What would I want if I were trying to come in off the street?'" The answer for Stevens was a combination of safety and freedom. She made sure that the first Magdalene home felt like a real home, with plenty of clean sheets, real dishes and hot showers.

Niki recently graduated from the Magdalene program and now serves as office manager at Thistle Farms. She recalls her first few days in Magdalene's safe house. "At first, all I wanted to do was sleep and eat and take showers. I remember that someone had made a crockpot of chicken and rice and put it in the safe house. It was like I had never eaten before." The idea, writes Stevens, is to "love one another lavishly."

Once the women have a secure home, they're invited to "speak truth," to tell their own stories no matter how difficult. It's an essential part of the program in every circle and every community meeting. The women also practice when they go out into the community with their stories and their beauty products. Carolyn, who has been in the program 18 months, describes the importance of making these presentations. When she first came to Magdalene, she says, she had no intention of telling anyone what had happened to her. But she noticed that those who told their stories started getting better, while those who kept their stories hidden didn't. She decided to venture out. When she finally told the story, "It was like losing 30 pounds," she said. "It was an incredible part of healing. I was sold by a pimp when I was 13. I was raped by a man and a woman. I thought I couldn't tell anyone that story. But every time I tell it, I can feel it losing its power over me." The benefit wasn't only for her; it also helped others. People came up to Carolyn and said, "That happened to my daughter" or "That happened to me."

The other part of the recovery equation is freedom. While the program is highly structured, women have to take responsibility for their own recovery. "Most of the women who come here have had very bad experiences with authority," Stevens says. "I knew that if I was in recovery, I wouldn't want some house mother over me telling me what to do. When a woman comes into the program, she is issued a house key. I don't have a house key and most of the staff don't."

Instead of a hierarchical structure, Stevens built a community ethos. A set of principles guides the women in their community life. Stevens recently articulated these principles in a book, *Find Your Way Home*, that pairs stories from the women with principles like "Walk Behind," "Take the Longer Path" and "Think of the Stranger as God." I had expected to find these principles or other expectations posted at the homes where the women live, but they are not. In fact, the few rules that the women live by are reiterated at nearly every house meeting and seem to be constantly changing. At one meeting, curfew was discussed. "So we can't have anyone here past 11 p.m., is that right?" asked one woman. "I thought it was ten," said another. "I thought it was six," said a third.

As with any community, often the hardest part is living with other people. Carolyn says that humbling herself to live in community is one of the most important parts of her recovery now. Conflict comes from the way that other women clean the bathroom or where they leave their things or how loud they talk. But remaining committed is crucial to her. "It would be easy to walk away now. I have a home. I got

married on Valentine's Day. I'm sober. But I've never finished anything in my life," Carolyn says. "And I've tried doing things my way. That don't work. You have to be humble."

Living together can be difficult because many of the women lack basic communication skills. Skirmishes are often caused by arguments over tiny things—seats at meetings, cigarettes, coffee cake. The staff works with women on dialogue and perspective. Jason Frazier, one of Magdalene's few paid staff members and the only male, says that nearly everything that goes wrong between the women is something small that's made big. He has learned that problems can usually be solved by giving women the opportunity to hear one another's point of view. These conflicts then become the ground for healing.

Stevens believes that Magdalene can be a national model for helping women who are trying to change their lives. It provides a sufficient amount of time for women to get well and to begin to experience the benefits of health, as well as a foundation for interpersonal connection, a sheltered work environment and systems of support that make for long-lasting healing. At the same time, its community ethos leads women who have gotten well or are getting well to serve as models for other women. Graduates share their stories. Women who are 18 months into the program and starting to heal and thrive are an encouragement to those who are just beginning to stand on their feet. Magdalene's culture of healing depends not so much on individual staff members or Stevens's charismatic presence as on the dynamic between women. That dynamic is difficult to replicate. It evolves in the community through years of trial and error, patience and attention. These are women from troubled backgrounds, and they are involved in a fragile process. Yet in Magdalene's 15 years, there have been no incidents of violence and very few times when a woman was asked to leave because her problems were hurting other women.

Community ethos is powerful. Late one afternoon at Thistle Farms, a volunteer gathers the women together to talk about their experiences in the program. When the conversation turns negative and women start complaining, Valerie, a graduate of the program, speaks up. "That's just the hit, ain't it?" she says. "I don't know about you, but Magdalene is the best goddamn thing that ever happened to me. You get programs, classes, everything is there for you. You need something? Ask God to give it to you. But there is some shit you got to do yourself. I don't know about you, but nobody ever forced my mouth open and put the dope in it. And another thing, ain't nobody forcing anything on you. If you are done with the dope, then you are done. If

you ain't through, you ain't through. When you are done, you are willing."

After the meeting is over, Valerie follows up with a few of the women to make sure they understand that she isn't dismissing them. To one of them she says gently, "You're feelings are valid, sweetie." But she adds, "The disease will try to get to you any way it can. If it can't get to you the way it always has, it will try to use your sisters."

Late on the spring afternoon that I visited Magdalene, Sheila, another graduate of the program, took me out to the areas where prostitutes in Nashville most commonly work. As we drove there, she told me about her life on the streets. Molested by her mother, she left home at 14. She worked in strip clubs until she met a pimp who, she said, "sold me a dream." She worked as a prostitute across the country and has an arrest record in many states. She was in her mid-30s when she came to Magdalene after another stint in jail. Within six months of beginning the program, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She survived and today is married with two small children. She often goes to this part of town to hand out her card to prostitutes. Her message to them is simple: "When you are tired, call me." Her resurrection is written on her face. The wounds are there, but so is the healing.