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Court program helps women turn their lives around

Women facing a return to state prison for nonviolent felonies plead guilty and enter treatment instead. Most are going on to lead crime-free lives.

By Victoria Kim, Los Angeles Times

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Sprinting down the Hollywood Hills on a radiant April morning, a 35-year-old meth addict named Orange told herself in a moment of clarity: "This is it. You're done."

Fast approaching from behind was a furious homeowner who had caught her burglarizing his home. Somewhere in Long Beach, her parole officer was probably tapping his foot impatiently, waiting for her to show up.

She came up to the edge of a cliff with nowhere to run. Thirty feet below, rush-hour traffic zoomed by on Cahuenga Boulevard. She thought about her prior arrests and what another one — her 21st — would mean. She jumped.

On any given day, Judge Michael Tynan's fourth-floor courtroom in downtown L.A.'s criminal courts building is crowded with lives in need of redemption.

Over the years, the 73-year-old Army veteran with a gruff, no-nonsense voice has taken on populations that others have given up on — the county's drug addicts, homeless, mentally ill and, in recent years, women parolees. The Los Angeles County Superior Court judge oversees a number of programs known as collaborative or problem-solving courts, designed to address the underlying issues — addictions, mental health, poverty — that lead to repeated arrests and prison terms.

The former public defender has a way of encouraging people — or sometimes scaring them straight — that has made his court-supervised treatment programs successful.

Tynan believes that, given the chance and support, people can turn their lives around.

Since 2007, Tynan has been running the Second Chance Women's Re-entry Court program, one of the first in the nation to focus on women in the criminal justice system. Through the court, women facing a return to state prison for nonviolent felonies plead guilty to their crimes and enter treatment instead.

Although women make up only a small fraction of prison inmates, their numbers have been climbing for decades at a far steeper rate than men's. Women are also more likely to be convicted

of nonviolent drug or property crimes motivated by addictions or necessity.

As Tynan reads through their files, the women anxiously wait. They fix their makeup, step out for cigarette breaks and halfheartedly flip through the pages of well-worn mystery and romance novels. Some come cradling pregnant bellies, others pushing strollers with young children.

Based on what he sees in the report and what the women have to say, Tynan doles out sanctions or incentives such as a month back in jail, an order to write a 1,000-word essay or permission to go on an out-of-town trip.

It hasn't been all success. Of the close to 200 women who have entered the program since it began in 2007, one relapsed and died from an overdose. A couple dozen failed treatment and were ordered to serve out their sentences in prison.

But overwhelmingly, the women are making it through treatment and going on to lead crime-free lives.

A former drug-dealing mother of four recently began working for the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services mentoring other troubled parents. A woman who once had an abusive boyfriend who set her on fire is now preparing for secretarial school and reconnecting with her daughter. A recovering alcoholic with repeated DUI arrests who was severely anorexic, bordering on heart failure, is playing soccer and taking theater classes in junior college.

"A lot of them have been really, really beleaguered and beaten up, primarily by the men in their lives," Tynan says. His court, he adds, "is just a sliver of what's needed."

Orange survived the fall, but she broke her back and shattered her foot so badly that it swelled until the skin ripped. A few months later, she was wheeled into Tynan's court, facing burglary charges, as a candidate for the Re-entry Court program.

She thought she saw skepticism in the judge's eyes as he read through her file. She feared he wouldn't accept her because of the severity of her injuries and her prior felonies. She just barely propped herself up on crutches, hoping Tynan would think her injuries were less serious than they were.

With her record, the alternative was a lengthy prison sentence.

Her downward spiral had begun at age 13, when her grandmother, who raised her, abruptly passed away. She was left with an inattentive mother, a physically abusive stepfather and a string of drug-dealer boyfriends, some of whom beat her bloody and drove her near suicide.

What started with alcohol and marijuana quickly became LSD and cocaine and, ultimately, meth. A DUI arrest at age 17 was followed by a growing list of petty theft, burglary and drug charges. She did six months, then three years, then five years and four months. After each release, she was

back behind bars in less than a year. Life on the outside felt abnormal and uncomfortable.

Now, for the first time, she was being shown a different path. The proceedings went by in a blur — she couldn't focus on anything but the pain and staying on her feet. Later, someone told her, Tynan agreed to give her a chance.

Thirty miles east of Tynan's courtroom, the women of the Re-entry Court program are housed in a Pomona drug treatment facility for women called Prototypes.

The complex has the look and feel of an elementary school, with bright-colored murals, playgrounds and dirt plots sprouting gardening projects. The dorms are painted in pastel shades, with the occasional motivational quote taped onto the wall.

Here, the women are referred to as clients or patients rather than defendants or inmates. Binders and book bags take the place of handcuffs and jail scrubs, and women shuttle between therapy, life- and job-skills classes, chores and support group meetings. Mothers are reunited with their young children and given counseling and parenting classes.

Behind closed doors, the path to recovery is slow and painful as women learn to open up about their past. Some lived on the street for decades, hustling or resorting to prostitution for the next fix. Many had their children taken away and had felt, at one point, that it would be best if they stayed away. All had addictions, often compounded by mental illness and histories of trauma and abuse.

"There are a few of them who come in so broken and so sick that you're amazed that they're alive," said Nancy Chand, a deputy public defender who acts as the attorney for most of the women. "They come to realize that it wasn't their fault that they were hurt. As that shame starts to come off, the confidence comes out."

Their time here, a minimum of six months but longer for most, is designed to prepare them for another shot at life — be that a job at McDonald's, a new relationship with their children or paralegal school.

The treatment, currently funded through a grant from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and donated services from Prototypes, costs about \$18,000 for each woman per year. But compared with keeping them in prison and their children in foster care for years, the state is saving millions of dollars, the program's organizers say.

Orange sinks into an army green camping chair outside her home as the screen door swings shut behind her.

It is dusk. She sucks away at the one addiction left in her life — Marlboro Reds — and flicks the ash into a rusted coffee tin. She wants to quit — as soon as she can get her insurance to pay for nicotine patches.

Her first months here in Pomona were less than smooth. Saddled with the pain and bitterness

over what she had done to her body and life, she threw tantrums when she wasn't allowed to smoke and screamed in the hallways.

Tynan sent her to county jail for 30 days and ordered her to write an essay on "self will." That was all the reminder she needed of the life that she was being given a chance to leave behind.

"It took jail to wake me up," she recalled. "I'm not going back."

In April, around the time she marked two years' sobriety, she was allowed to move out of residential treatment into a sober living home near Prototypes. She decorated her half of the room in black, white and pink. There's no air conditioning, but she and her roommate have each served prison time in the desert.

In court shortly before her move, Tynan praised her, noting that her report called her "tremendous" and "hard working." Orange told him that after the last round of surgeries on her foot, she's going back to school. She asked that her last name not be made public because she didn't want employers to know the details of her former life.

She's learning the everyday routines that make up a normal life. She is learning to cook, starting with rice and pasta.

"I've always had my food prepared for me by the prison chefs," she says sheepishly.

She's also learning to forgive herself and to rely on others. She's patching up her relationship with her mother. When her cellphone rings on this day, she tells her mother about going to group therapy and then to the thrift store.

She takes a deep drag on her cigarette and ponders the years she has lost. She wishes she'd come across the Re-entry Court sooner, she says. But she also realizes she's one of the lucky ones.

"How many thousands are in the system?" Orange says, staring into the horizon. "I think about all the girls whose files don't make it there."