

Healing Place is a success

I attended a remarkable graduation ceremony Thursday night.

There were only six graduates. They weren't dressed in caps and gowns. And they didn't receive four-year degrees.

But what they achieved is in many ways far more impressive.

These women were the first clients of the Healing Place for



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Women in Wake County to move on to the final stage of recovery from drug abuse or alcohol addiction or both. Eventually they will find jobs and apart-

ments and be reunited with their children.

That is the real goal. Having lost the kids is their anguish.

Take the tale of M.W. (I agreed not to use her name to protect her confidentiality and the privacy of her family.)

M.W. was in prison on the latest in a string of larceny charges when her probation officer suggested she try the newly opening Healing Place. That was Feb. 1.

M.W. did not want to do it, but she had violated her probation (again), missed several appointments with her probation officer and failed every drug test administered. The other option was another 10 months in jail.

As angry as she was when she arrived, she found that every day she learned one thing that would intrigue her enough to stay another day.

M.W. had started abusing cocaine, marijuana and alcohol shortly after her oldest son, now 12, was born.

Throughout his young life and that of his younger brother, now 6, she was more intent on getting high than pretty much anything else.

On Thursday night before the ceremony, she ticked off all the ways she disappointed her boys: the missed holidays and birthdays, the school events she failed to show up for. She was arrested repeatedly, thieving to get money for drugs. And she could scarcely hold down a fast-food job, although she once worked as a customer service rep. Finding a job where no drug tests were performed became a top priority.

Now she is trying to repair her relationships with the boys, who live with her parents.

Over the next several months, M.W. will begin parenting classes. She will also start acting as mentor and counselor to women just starting the program.

"A lot of the women come in here worrying about their children," she said. "I know what that's like. I can definitely relate."

That "one-helps-the-next-one" approach is the basic strategy. At the Healing Place for Men, which opened a few years ago, nearly 70 percent of graduates stay clean and sober for at least a year.

Here is the other thing that is impressive. The Healing Place — supported in part by county and city tax money — houses, feeds, cares for and counsels these women for \$25 a day, including administrative costs.

For prisoners, the comparable figure is \$67.

Jo Lawson, director of programming, said at the beginning of the ceremony that many people doubted whether there was a need for a Healing Place for Women.

Now every bed is full, the waiting list is long, and 10 more beds are on order.

So in many ways, Thursday night's event was a moment of celebration for the program as well as the women graduating.

Congratulations, and much continued success.