

# Women Helping Women... Living Forward Alliance Mentors Women Re-Entering Society After Incarceration

By Michelle Leigh Smith

"I have learned a lot about beliefs and how my past affected my life," says one of mentees. "I am moving forward because of this program."

Mentees worked on a ceramics project as a fundraiser for Living Forward Alliance, a two-year-old non-profit that assists women re-enter society from incarceration.

By Michelle Leigh Smith

Letting go, moving forward and making better choices is the mission of Living Forward Alliance. Through a one-year program, Living Forward Alliance participants are guided to rethink their histories and rewrite their futures.

Living Forward Alliance, a 501(c)(3), is a two-year-old nonprofit providing both education and mentoring to women who have been incarcerated for drug-related offenses.

Although reported incarceration costs vary, Texas Department of Corrections reports \$17,500 per inmate, per year. "So far we have 40 women succeeding upon discharge which translates to \$700,000 per year saved with their success," says Maria Francis, executive director of LFA.

"Our five-year goal is to work with 100 women a year which translates to \$1.75 million saved per year for our community," says program director Suzanne Jarvis. "Now we have 60 mentees, 40 mentors, 20 volunteers and those numbers are growing, as the lower recidivism rates reinforce the program's success."

"We go into a facility, present the program and the women have the option of participating," Jarvis explains. "Now we are in a pilot phase. Ultimately, our goal is to go statewide and then national. The overall national recidivism rate is 60 percent. For the graduates of LFA, rates are much less - 20 percent for first group, and 11 percent for the second group."

"Technically the women are on probation (probationers) and in drug treatment programs through the Harris County Department of Corrections," Jarvis says. "It is a 'diversion program' therapeutic community where women who commit drug related offenses are sent to address their addiction. Instead of keeping them in jail or sending them to state prison, they work off time for their offense in drug treatment. Most women are arrested for coping crimes (DWIs, bad checks, non-violent crimes). They are tested and assessed and if they qualify for the diversion program, they may enter a part of the court system where they do not have to stay in jail."

LFA attracts volunteers from across Houston. Luiza Grandchamp, who lives off Braeswood and Loop 610, serves as fundraising coordinator. "I was in Brazil when a friend told me about it," she says. "We both work with Harmony Life within LFA and that's how I got involved. We coach, we encourage and we listen. It's about strength and talking with the women about how they are feeling emotionally."

"The mentoring commitment is for one year - we go into the facility while the women are still incarcerated," explains Jarvis. "We have weekly programs as well as weekend sessions. We want to be with them at least three to five months inside the facility before they are released. They are assigned a mentor before they are released. Once they are released, they enter our after-care program and participate in community service projects."

"Many of them want to continue contact long after the year-long commitment," Jarvis says. "We partner with them based on communication styles and what works best. We are



Mentors and Mentees with the Living Forward Alliance participate in a group session.

## Women in the Work Force

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Art is one of the tools used to help mentees.



Luiza Grandchamp works one-on-one with a mentee.

also looking at a job creation piece because with a record, education plays a huge role. We want to get them on their feet economically. Some of them are from different states so while they are on probation, they can't return to previous jobs. Those women rely on us even more because they don't have family or friends here once they get out."

Francis explains that the women regain their sense of self-worth and belonging in society. "The personal development program teaches the women different ways to release stress and mentors fill the gap between incarceration and drug rehabilitation," she says.

"The women learn the power of the freedom of choice and take responsibility for their behaviors and the consequences of their choices," says Francis. She has watched the women learn principles of intention and commitment and apply them in their lives.

"We have designed our program so it can be rolled out on a state and national level," Francis says. "For our women, their children and families, succeeding in our program and life is priceless. We empower women to stand with dignity and a new sense of self-worth, accountable for the past, drawing wisdom from it, yet not determined by it."

After the year's commitment, one mentee says, "I've gained self appreciation from this program. This is important to me because I want to work on my inner self before I leave the program. I want to leave with confidence and I feel like I have that now."

They welcome participation in the following areas: Mentors, Donations, Financial Support, Program Sponsors, Volunteer Professional Skills, Community Connections, Job

Internships and Employment Opportunities. More information is available at [www.livingforwardalliance.org](http://www.livingforwardalliance.org) or call (832) 754 7743.



Living Forward Alliance "graduates" show off their certificates of completion from the program.