

Back on their feet

With the help of a program designed for their needs, people whose backgrounds make it difficult to find work receive a second chance at starting a career.

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La-Shell Lewis first went to prison for drug possession in 1988. After her release, she was clean for two years but a relapse sent her back in 1996. Two more years of sobriety were met with another relapse and another visit to prison in 2000.

But prior to her release in 2001, Lewis' life was changed when Bishop Noel Jones, pastor of City of Refuge, visited the women's detention center and gave her the message she so desperately needed.

Lewis began working with mentally disabled children, then in 2003 she went back to school to get her high school diploma.

Now eight years sober, the mother of six, two of whom are deceased, is a medical file clerk for Lynwood-based Barbour & Floyd Medical Associates.

Approximately four months ago, her life took another turn when she passed by Shields for Families main office and noticed men and women carrying ladders and working on telephone poles. Her curiosity caused her to inquire. It was then that she made the decision to expand her skills by joining Shields' vocational certification program, which would certify her in fiber optics and telecommunications.

"I learned fiber optic cable wiring, telephone jacks ... just doing the basics such as punching down, learning how to do video sound and network," said Lewis, who had no prior skills in the area. "My office has a telecommunications room ... so by looking into the [program], I was [able to see] this is the same stuff and I love doing things with my hands. ... Say our phone lines go down at our company I am [now] able to help see why the phones don't work. ... I can go into our telecommunications box and see what's the problem, whether it's the telephone jack or the phone [itself]."

Shields for Families, in partnership with the county Department of Children and Family Services, has been providing career opportunities in medical billing, fiber optics and telecommunications for residents like Lewis, many of whom have prior drug and criminal records.

In addition, Shields provides community workshops, vocational services, legal services and linkage and referral resources to all



Photos by Gary McCarthy

La-Shell Lewis had been incarcerated several times before turning her life around in 2001. A graduate of the Shields for Families program, she now works as a medical file clerk.

persons. Currently, Lewis is receiving legal services from Shields in order to get her record expunged.

Dawn Warrington, who also graduated from the program's first class Nov. 13 and received a certificate in fiber optics and telecommunications, has had her own road to recovery.

The mother of two lost her job as a florist three years ago when she went to prison. "I never wanted to be away from my children again," she said.

It was then that she began looking to enter a drug rehab program that would allow her to have both of her children with her. After a long, in-depth search, she found Shields and for the past 14 months has been in its Exodus Day Treatment Program, which helps women with substance abuse and mental health problems and those at risk for homelessness.

Four months ago, she too became aware of the organization's Vocational Certification Program and began the 12-to-14-week class designed to give people the skills they need to find jobs, be self-employed or perform additional tasks at their current job.

"We learned everything from ladder control to fusing the fiber together. We learned so much, I mean I got certified in fiber," Warrington said. "We learned how to climb the poles, we learned how to hook up cable, how to do telephone lines by installing them from the pole, from the hub, all of that. It was a great class."

With three months left to go in the recovery program, Warrington is excited about the possibilities of employment.

"I have gotten so much out of it," she said. "I have learned how to stand on my own two feet. I've been unable to work so that has humbled me as far as finances but I am presently on aid. I am learning how to stand on my two feet without having to break the law to get it and I've learned to be a better parent," she said.

"I'm learning how to live without the use of drugs. My life is good today. This program is just awesome. They help you in

every aspect of your life. I am working now on getting my high school diploma through Shields for Families. ... They have life skills classes, relapse prevention, anger management and I have my two children here. ... I know good things are going to come.”

The vocational program, based out of the Lynwood office, 2640 Industry Way, is held four days a week, three hours a day. There, they have a telecommunications room with a lab so that everything is hands on and also have a lecture room for instruction and testing.

Shields has been providing these services, according to vocational services trainer Adrian Williamson, who specializes in fiber optics and communication, for about six years but in terms of the program itself this is their first.

The graduating class was made up of 22 students. Of those who were unemployed, eight have been offered employment, accounting for roughly 50 percent of the class who are working now.

Prior to the program, many worked as warehouse attendants, security guards and customer service representatives.

The classes are free. The organization takes care of the tuition.

“The students are recruited throughout the community,” Williamson said. “Some drop in [and] some are part of the Shields for Families services. Then we orient them to make sure that they are ready for the course.”

Students in this class came from Inglewood, Lynwood, Compton, Watts, Echo Park, Los Angeles, even Eagle Rock and Glendale.

What makes the program a success is Shields’ ability to partner with corporations throughout the area. According to Williamson, students have found placement at Time Warner Cable, T-Mobile, Charter Cable, Verizon Wireless and AT&T by working directly with their human resources department.

“They know that when our students graduate they are given the proper training and then they know that the persons are going to do extensive customer service components, [such as] dealing with the clients when they go into their home and then they have the skill set as well. So, it’s kind of a win-win for us and [partnering organizations] because they know that these persons are dedicated and they want to be in the telecommunications field and for us it’s a shoe-in because our successes are basically based on our placement,” Williamson said.

Students, he said, generally make anywhere from \$12-\$25 an hour and this being based on entry level positions, therefore there is room to make more money as they continue.

Audrey Tousant, program manager, added that “the goal is to assist [clients] in their economic growth and enrich their ability to attain salaries higher than minimum wage.”

In addition, Shields also has connections with smaller, more local businesses but more importantly the skills provided make it possible for students to start their own business right after they’ve completed the program.



Photos by Gary McCarthy

Shields for Families program manager Audrey Tousant (left, with La-Shell Lewis) says her “goal is to assist [clients] in their economic growth and enrich their ability to attain salaries higher than minimum wage.”

“We try to give them as much training and vocational training in telecommunications as we possibly can; meaning they learn how to repair computers, they learn how to install the computer, they learn how to install phones. ... We teach our students how to install surveillance cameras, we teach them fiber optics, fiber optics is the newest way of transmitting data, we teach them ladder management and pole climbing,” Williamson said.

“So, we try to make it where when our students graduate they have multiple skills and that they are able not only to work for a particular corporation, for instance Time Warner, but they can also work for themselves.”

For Lewis, the program could not have come at a better time. After working for Barbour & Floyd for two years, she was recently notified that she would be laid off as of Dec. 31. It is now Lewis’ hope to put her certificate to use and collaborate with Shields to find employment in the field.

The next class will begin Feb. 2. This time the program will be for eight to 12 weeks. It will continue to be held four days a week, three hours a day and will be held at Shields’ Lynwood office.