

LEAP: Ladies Empowerment & Action Program

Cocktail Conversation

The reasons I love working for LEAP abound. One is that I get to spend time with LEAP graduates - interesting women who make me smile, laugh, cry and work to be a better person every single day. Their stories are heartbreaking, harrowing, happy, hopeful, heartbreaking and sometimes -- a bit crazy. Their stories also provide me with a never ending supply of riveting anecdotes at cocktail parties when friends ask, "so how is work?"

A recent situation provided fodder for the crazy variety.

The day started off with much joy when LEAP board member and graduate, Cafe, and I picked Karen up from the prison in Homestead. We celebrated Karen's freedom over breakfast at IHOP, and then dropped her off at the airport for her much anticipated trip home to Virginia.

Twenty minutes later I received a phone call. Karen was caught up in the horrific shooting at the Ft. Lauderdale Airport. Over the next 12 hours, we exchanged worried phone calls, including one with screams and police officers shouting "hands up, get on the ground!" and Karen repeating "Mahlia, OH MY GOD please don't hand up!!



Karen, five minutes after her release from prison.



Karen, 15 hours after the Ft. Lauderdale Airport Shooting.

Sometime after midnight, Karen called. All flights were cancelled, and she and other passengers were being shuttled from the airport to Port Everglades. I arrived and searched for Karen amongst the hundreds of haggard and shell-shocked travelers. Miraculously, I spotted her as she staggered off the bus -- a much different vision from the bundle of joy we had picked up that morning, but with her can-do attitude and sense of humor intact.

Karen's account of her experience is below. She was the resident raconteur of her LEAP class, so be sure to read on.

Mahlia Lindquist
LEAP Executive Director

A Few Good Men

With all female founders, boards and staff, and of mission of service to women, LEAP has always looked like an all women's club. While our mission is to serve ladies in prison, it has never been our intention to exclude men from our community. It just sort of happened that way. Fortunately, all that has changed. We are delighted and proud to announce that Shed Boren and Tom Bowman have joined the LEAP board, and Dale Quaint has been hired as the LEAP in-prison instructor. Shed has a Ph.d in social work, is a longtime advocate for disadvantaged populations, former CEO of Camillus House and Camillus Health Care Concern with deep experience as a health care executive. Tom is an experienced criminal defense attorney and former prosecutor with a demonstrated commitment to criminal justice reform. Dale has volunteered in the prisons for 17 years, including with LEAP as a substance abuse and addiction counselor. Dale, Shed and Tom bring much needed experience, heart, not to mention male perspective:) to LEAP and we are thrilled to have them on board. Welcome Gentlemen!

Karen Plans, God laughs

For 4 years I fantasized about the "big day" when I would be released. I made all kinds of plans ranging from what I wanted to sink my teeth into to what mode of transportation I wanted to take to Richmond, Va.

Having graduated from LEAP, I was armed with plenty of wonderful resources, awesome contacts and of course a viable business plan, but practically speaking I had to decide how to make this transition to the free world. Greyhound was out of the question. Not that I am above riding on Greyhound; I've done it many times. Enough to know that the atmosphere is not conducive to the one thing I wanted the most for my release. Peace! More than food, more than real clothes, more than anything, I just wanted a calm, peaceful, smooth transition into my new life.

"Karen plans, God laughs!"

What I walked into was more chaos than I've experienced in my entire 54 years. Coming from a lifelong Herion addict whose been in some pretty horrible situation that's really saying a lot. I was relaxing at my departure gate at the Fort Lauderdale airport loving my freedom and anxious to get home to my family when a gunman decided to take the lives of 5 innocent people and wound countless others. Pandemonium broke out and I found myself being stampeded and pushed toward the gangway. Elderly people were falling to the ground, children were screaming and I...well I was praying. Instinct quickly jolted me into service mode and I began trying to help those who were panicking. One thing I recall thinking was "I am right where I am suppose to be." I also remember feeling angry that so many people could be affected by one persons actions. However, anger is a luxury I can not afford. Not in the airport, nor anywhere else in my life (LEAP program component Thinking for a Change.)

After spending 6 hours on the tarmac, 4 hours waiting for a bus to ship us to Port Everglades (would you believe I was loaded onto a Broward County Jail Bus!) My first 12 hrs out of prison were exhausted and so was I.

Two days later and I was finally home safe and sound. I want to extend a special thanks to my angel, Mahlia Lindquist of LEAP for being only a phone call away as well as Tarshea, (LEAP Graduate) for being a friend in the midst of her busy life.

Blessings to all of you and remember God has other plans for all of us!

Karen Graves, Leap Class #12

Announcements

Graduation

LEAP's Class 13 graduated in February and marked the occasion by sharing their business plans, stories, plans and poems. We had a great turnout from the extended LEAP community, including mentors, our volunteer guest instructors and other supporters. A huge thank to everyone who joined us -- and a special shout out to long time to LEAP volunteer Tracy Mourning and Women's Fund Executive Director Debra Korge for making the graduation even more memorable by sharing their own stories and stories and words of wisdom.

Class 14

Class 14 started in January. They are 13 ladies strong and will be graduating at the end of the summer. LEAP graduations are always joyful occasions, and a great way to see first hand what LEAP is all about. If you would like to attend the next graduation, let us know and we will be happy to add you to the invite list.



Class 13

Mentors

A special part LEAP is the mentor program, wherein we match each one of our ladies with their own mentors. The mentors visit the prison as a group 5-6 times to meet their mentees one on one. If you or anyone you know would like to learn more about serving as a mentor, please plan on attending our

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America is the land of the
second chance - and when
the gates of the prison
open, the path ahead
should lead to a better life

-

George W. Bush