

## PEOPLE

# LifeBuilders: 'You've got to get them on the right path'

BY SIOBHAN MCDONOUGH  
Correspondent

Danielle Houle was on a path of self-destruction, abusing alcohol and drugs and caught in a vicious cycle of being in and out of prison.

When she was incarcerated, she behaved.

When she wasn't, she felt destitute and fell back on what she felt were her best resources: alcohol and cocaine.

Now, thanks to LifeBuilders of the Treasure Coast, the 37-year-old Sebastian woman is living a life sharply contrasting what she did in her past. She is sober, employed, renting her own housing and ready to harness the responsibility of motherhood by regaining custody of her child.

"Without LifeBuilders, I'd be out on the street with nothing," she said. "Being a drug or alcohol addict, you go to what you know. But LifeBuilders was able to show me how to live life."

Houle is one of thousands of people who have been "touched by" the 19th District Judicial Circuit whether by committing a crime or being the relative of someone who has.

Diamond Litty, the 19th Judicial Circuit's public defender, has worked tirelessly over the years to help people via state-funded programs to lead a sober, crime-free life.

State-funded programs such as Mental Health Court, Juvenile and Adult Drug Court, which are known as diversion courts, and programs housed in the county jails known as re-entry programs, have been extraordinarily successful in breaking the cycle of crime, she said. The missing piece, however, was something that public or state funding could not address, thus the reason LifeBuilders was created.

The charity, formed three years ago, provides help to select offenders — people who if given a little guidance and help, will not enter the court system again. It also provides help for anyone "touching" the criminal court system or the dependency court system; for example, children who may have been abused or neglected.

To qualify, an applicant may either be a defendant, a victim, the child of either a defendant or victim, or again be in some way connected by either criminal or dependency court in the 19th Judicial Circuit which consists of Indian River, Martin, St. Lucie and Okeechobee counties. The ultimate goal is reduced recidivism, reduction of jail overcrowding and increased public safety.



Diamond Litty, 19th Judicial Circuit public defender and founder of LifeBuilders of the Treasure Coast. PHOTO BY BENJAMIN HAGER

LifeBuilders is very careful about dispersing the money it has raised, Litty says. The organization, made up of six volunteers, does a thorough check on the applicant's standing at their place of employment, with their landlord to see if they are paying rent on time, and with probation officers for status reports.

The organization has raised \$500,000 from various groups including the Johns Island Foundation, McCabe Foundation and United Way of Vero Beach since its inception.

"We are not Big Brothers, Big Sisters or Boys and Girls Club with a lengthy track record," she said. "We are dealing with people involved in the criminal justice system. It says (those who have donated) believe in mankind, the goodness of people and that people can change their lives and behavior. They want to contribute to make the community a better place.

"If you don't help some of these people, they will be back committing crimes," she said. "You've got to get them on the right path."

So far, LifeBuilders has given money to 881 clients. Of those, 168 are from Indian River County. It has doubled its disbursements in the county over the past 13 months, according to the organization.

"Have we made mistakes to some of people who we've given money? They lost their job or became destitute again? Absolutely. Does it happen a lot? No," said Litty. She added that the organization has a 90 percent success rate.

Applicants must have exhausted all other avenues for help before soliciting LifeBuilders, and they must sign an agreement to pay-it-forward.

Kristen Bracken, circuit re-entry director with the 19th Judicial Circuit, said re-entry programs help curb recidivism some 8-15 percent. "It's a tremendous taxpayer issue and public safety issue," she said, adding the cost savings is significant when you realize the lower recidivism rate compared to the state average of 38 percent.

Other statistics she offered: Most people recidivate within the first 90 days; and about 80 percent of the people in county jails are in there for substance abuse-related crimes.

"We want to help people who want to help themselves," said Bracken, who also serves on the LifeBuilders board. "We're not helping just anyone off the street who did something and needs a place to stay. We investigate the entire situation surrounding the individual and make a decision based on factors illustrating how a candidate has proven their desire and motivation to become successful."

The kind of things LifeBuilders has offered included \$200 for a bicycle to get to-and-from work on, and as much as \$2,500 to cover rent during a difficult time. Neglected children have had camp fees covered and people studying for the GED have gotten help with book fees.

"It's life-changing," Bracken added. "Sometimes those little things mean a heck of a lot more than the bigger things."

That was certainly the case for Lewis Baker, 47, of Port St. Lucie. He has been out of rehab for four years and alcohol- and drug-free for the last five. He had numerous arrests, was a substance abuser and suffered mental illness. He drank for 30 years, and smoked pot and did cocaine. He has been jailed about 70 times and found it more comfortable there than figuring out what to do with himself each time he was released. His last charge was for driving with a suspended license. Finally, he was placed in an alcohol and drug treatment program for 18 months.

Now he is a peer specialist who helps people with mental health problems, goes to their homes to counsel them, encourages

kids to avoid harmful substances and teaches them the triggers and coping mechanisms.

"When you are struggling to change you don't know who to turn to," he said. "It's very scary when you've been in jail for many years. You don't want to engage with the court system. But they are a group of people who do not want you in jail. They want to help find ways you can stay out."

Baker said he had never had his own place until he turned 42 and LifeBuilders helped him. "I had two nickels in my pocket when I got sober.

"It feels different, I get a second chance," he said. "LifeBuilders has looked past my criminal past, and taken me for what I am today. I can walk down the street with my head up as a person. I get to live in the community instead of exist in the community."

Houle feels similarly.

Since being released from prison in January after 5½ years for a conviction of DWI with serious bodily injury, Houle wended her way through a series of programs approved by the sheriff's department's re-entry program/public defender's office and LifeBuilders.

LifeBuilders helped her with the \$125/week rent for six weeks and putting together a resume. Houle is employed as a front desk clerk at a local hotel and cleans rooms at another one.

"If I didn't have the help of LifeBuilders, I wouldn't be where I'm at today," said Houle. "The biggest thing it gave me was stability." ■