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## 'Life didn't mean a thing to her'

### Former prostitute defies expectations in recovery from addiction

By ELISHA SAUERS Staff Writer

On the stretch of West Street's sidewalk between the Lutheran Mission Society storefront and the Light House shelter, a handful of haggard, weatherworn locals linger about, their clouds of breath visible in the winter air.

Lisa Wood knows many of the regulars on the downtown thoroughfare, the same place where she spent many cold days of her own life, homeless, prostituting and strung out on crack or heroin, during the interludes between jail for petty crimes.

The staff at the Lutheran society knew her as one of those familiar faces they had little hope would ever leave the street.

Today, they're pleased to say she proved them wrong.

On a recent day, Ms. Wood, 34, was back on West Street, but this time, sitting inside the cozy LMS Compassion Care nursery, playing with her gurgling 8-month-old baby girl, MaKayla Evans, and talking with the LMS workers - some of her best friends.

"I think she's sticking with the good people now - you don't see her having anything to do with the others now," said Audrey Sheets, coordinator of the LMS center in Annapolis. "I don't believe she'll ever go back the other way."



Shannon Lee Zirkle —HometownAnnapolis.com

Annapolis native Lisa Wood, a recovering drug addict and former prostitute, snuggles with her 8-month-old daughter, MaKayla Evans, during a Bible study at the Lutheran Mission Society's Compassion Care center.

Ms. Wood is a year and a month sober, a benchmark she's been struggling to reach for 17 years, she said.

With the support of Compassion Care, a local women and children's shelter, she's stayed in a studio apartment above the agency's store for about six months while receiving resources through the program's tutoring, parenting, budgeting, nutritional cooking, job training and Bible study classes.

She has a recovery "accountability partner" she calls upon when she needs a shoulder to lean on, and she's an active member of Calvary Community Church, where she is now the assistant coordinator of the nursery ministry.

"If I can do it right here, right in the middle of where I used to get high, anybody can do it," Ms. Wood said with understated confidence. "You just gotta want to."

Ms. Wood has a calming effect on those around her. She chuckles often and uninhibitedly.

Though she lacks quite a bit of formal education, she articulates her past - using words like "feeble," "destitute," "self-destructive," "beckoning," "deteriorate," "brutal" and "affiliations" - a vocabulary one doesn't usually expect from a woman who dropped out of school when she was just 15.

Many who meet her today are shocked to learn of her traumatic history.

Born and raised right here in Annapolis, trouble began for Ms. Wood and her brother when she was just 4 years old. Their mother, who was an alcoholic, abandoned the family, leaving the children to be reared by their single father.

Ms. Wood's father also struggled with alcoholism and would be the first to introduce her to drugs - marijuana at the time - when she was just a young teen.

"He was like a mixture of my mother, my father, my best friend and my worst enemy all at once," she recalled.

At the age of 15, she ran away from home, she said, and moved in with a boyfriend and his mother. By that time, Ms. Wood's school transcripts showed that she had attended 14 different schools for moving residences and disciplinary problems.

The stay at her boyfriend's place came with a price. The boyfriend's mother, who was a prostitute, started pimping Ms. Wood, she said, and profiting from her exploits.

The drug use eventually followed. At 19, Ms. Wood caroused with a friend who "came from money," she said. The two would shoot pool at local dives and get high when either her friend bought powder cocaine or random men gave them crack.

That same year, her father died of a heart attack following a battle with throat cancer.

Her life began to snowball into a perpetual cycle of hooking, using and doing time for breaking the law.

According to the Maryland Judiciary System records, Ms. Wood has been to court for countless charges of drug possession, theft, robbery, burglary, trespassing, disorderly conduct and prostitution, and has spent more than a year's time incarcerated for criminal convictions.

"I've done a lot of bad things," Ms. Wood said at Compassion Care in early December, staring off in the direction of MaKayla as she cooed, "just to keep my drug habit."

A couple of years ago, Ms. Wood, and about 7 percent of the Maryland population, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, needed but was not receiving treatment for substance abuse.

The drugs and gritty lifestyle of sleeping on street corners had soured her, making her reckless and mean-spirited.

"She was dirty, high, and you could just tell she was doing prostitution," said Debbie Bowling, who worked in the LMS center store at the time. "She just sat here and kept moaning and groaning, and we had to actually put her out because she was scaring customers. People were coming up and saying, 'Something's wrong with her.' "

Before she was banished from the store, Ms. Wood would often come inside and make a scene, act rude and mumble indecipherably, Ms. Bowling remembered. Sometimes she would raid the agency's dumpster for clothes, throwing trash all over the parking lot.

Ms. Sheets said she was very familiar with Ms. Wood's situation, along with many other regulars on West Street, and she was always wary when Ms. Wood was near.

"She was not someone that I would trust," Ms. Sheets said. "It was like life didn't mean a thing to her."

Without friends or family caring for her, Ms. Wood was repeatedly abused by her Johns, nearly strangled to death and raped three times, she said.

At the point in her life when she was most scared, Ms. Wood said she was assaulted by a man who had picked her up during a trick, raping her right on the St. John's College campus. She never told the authorities, she said, because she thought no one would believe her - or that she would end up behind bars again.

She describes the ordeal with a stone look on her face, remembering the two roundhouse kicks to her head that "split her face wide open" and left a scar on her lip that still is faintly visible today.

The memories sometimes make her emotions swirl.

She gets choked up when she talks about her stay at Compassion Care.

"It really sucks to see half the females that I used to be out there with when I walk out on that balcony, and you still see them out there, you know?" she said. "It's sad, but it is what it is."

For brief periods she had been clean, either because of drug court or probation, she said.

About two years ago, she had secured a rental house and was working full time detailing cars. But it only lasted for about seven months before she wound up back on West Street.

The turning point occurred one day while Ms. Wood was in jail and saw her first sonogram pictures of MaKayla.

Though Ms. Wood has four other children - now ages 14, 12, 10 and 8 - all were adopted by local Annapolis families. This time, she didn't want to let go.

"I didn't want to give up another child, I just wanted something better for my life," she said.

This time she would get clean, for no other reason but to improve her life.

Just two weeks before delivering MaKayla, Ms. Wood was released from jail and briefly moved in with the family of MaKayla's father, a man Ms. Wood calls "a friend."

Then, she and MaKayla temporarily lived at the Light House while Ms. Wood contemplated her next move.

Today, for most who see the mother and daughter together, they describe Ms. Wood as "loving" and "naturally maternal." She spends much of her time reading and playing with her little girl, marveling her "first" achievements.

A few weeks ago, she bragged to her friends of MaKayla's newfound proficiency at crawling - even pulling at the low branches of their miniature Christmas tree.

She looks in the eyes of her daughter but hopes the glimmers of her own image don't lead little MaKayla down the same road of her own adolescence.

That's why already she brings MaKayla with her to church every week. She hopes that consistency and faith will mold her into a well-adjusted woman.

"I'm gonna be completely honest with her," Ms. Wood said one day, when asked if she'll divulge the details of her past with her daughter. "She'll turn out to be a beautiful young lady with morals and respect for herself that I never had."

Despite MaKayla's age, every plan that Ms. Wood makes today about her future career goals is a partnership with MaKayla: "We're" going to take things one step at a time, she'll say; "We" have big plans; "We're" going to be OK.

It took three false starts for Ms. Wood to get the courage to actually walk into the LMS center last summer, the spot she had been banned from ever entering again.

But things were looking up for Ms. Wood in July. She had been staying at the Light House, taking care of MaKayla and living sober for many months.

She pushed MaKayla's stroller through the front door of the little shop in which LMS sells secondhand goods to support the agency's programs. Among the cramped quarters of shelves and racks, she saw a familiar face that made her nervous.

Before Ms. Sheets could speak, Ms. Wood asked her to give her a moment to explain herself. Ms. Sheets led her to the rear of the store where a small chapel is set up.

She asked if she could stay with Compassion Care. After an interview with Leslie Jaseph, the director of community ministry, they accepted her into the program.

"When women come in here, we ask general questions like have you ever been a victim of abuse, have you ever been addicted to a substance, have you ever been incarcerated," Ms. Jaseph said. "It's just so we know if they can be honest and are they ready to embrace change."

Ms. Wood, who talks about her history openly, assured them she was ready.

On Dec. 29, six months after enrolling in the program, a room full of friends came to watch Ms. Wood graduate from Compassion Care. She sat before them, reading remarks she had prepared in advance and passages from the Bible. Between words, she swiped her hand across her tear-streamed cheeks, and rubbed her wet fingertips on the sides of her jeans.

She thanked them for their love and support, and passed around MaKayla for hugs and kisses.

"We did it!" she exclaimed to her daughter from across the room.

LMS' executive director, the Rev. David R. Maack, was in attendance that day, feeling as sentimental as a father whose child has left home for college, he said.

He's honest that he's both proud and anxious about Ms. Wood's future.

"Many people slip by," he said. "We just want the best for Lisa."

This month Ms. Wood and MaKayla moved out of the shelter and into the home of couple Sharon and Warner Janof, friends who also attend her church.

There, she will live while she prepares to retake the math portion of her General Educational Development degree and eventually enroll at Anne Arundel Community College.

She wants to study nursing and eventually become an addictions counselor to help others, she said.

She reacts to her successes now, not with euphoria, but humility and relief.

When asked by an acquaintance recently how she was able to overcome her harrowing past, she responded without pretense: "It's just you gotta accept life on life's terms."