



## THE PRINCETON PACKET

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### From behind a counter, taking a leap to sobriety

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#### Crawford House residents work at area stores as part of transition to independent living

Working at the newly constructed coffee bar in the Princeton Shopping Center's Chestnut Tree Books, a petite 20-year-old blond woman oversees the espresso, cakes and other caffeinated concoctions.

Pouring several large cups of coffee and offering up the half-and-half to customers on a recent morning, the former Ocean County resident turned barista, recalled how she transitioned from a self-proclaimed "train wreck," unable to get out of bed in the morning, to an independent — and sober — young woman.

At age 12, Danee, whose last name is being withheld, tried heroin for the first time. Now, eight years later, she is a resident of Crawford House — a Montgomery-based, long-term halfway house for women.

It's there, Danee said, while frothing milk at the shopping center's bookstore, she finally feels human again.

And it's there she is growing up.

"It's not like a rehab," Danee said. "It teaches you how to live. ... It gets me out doing things you're supposed to be doing."

Before Crawford House, the longest Danee went without drugs was three weeks. Now, with three months under her belt, she is planning to attend college in Mercer County to study political science, once her treatment concludes.

"They push you to be yourself. ... They push you to be a woman of excellence," Danee said. And "they help you to stabilize your life."

And part of that stabilization, has been her employment at Chestnut Tree Books.

An integral part of the Crawford House treatment program, the 22 women residing at the halfway house are required to seek out employment over the course of their six-month stay. Although the women must land a job independently, many over the years have found refuge in shops and businesses throughout the Princeton area.

Whether in Montgomery, Hillsborough or at the Princeton Shopping Center, Crawford House Executive Director Linda Leyhane said, these women are welcomed by area businesses and their employment often guides them through a portion of their drug and alcohol treatment.

Because the women admitted to the halfway house are from either an indigent population or homeless, Ms. Leyhane said many have been out of the work force for an extended time period.

"They haven't been productive," Ms. Leyhane said. "They haven't learned responsibility and accountability."

Working eight hours several days a week, the executive director said, corresponds with the treatment philosophy of Crawford House. The program forms a kind of bridge between the typical 28-day rehab program of many institutions and being on the outside living a sober life.

Michel Lemmerling, owner of Bon Appetit at the Princeton Shopping Center, noted how successful employing the women of Crawford House has been over the past several years. Although the jobs are entry level, Mr. Lemmerling described how their employment offers them a new chance, while many also become, once again, part of a community.

Whether it's the work environment or the camaraderie that has been established within the entire shopping center, the Bon Appetit owner said nearly all of his employees throughout the years have been able to adapt and live life without addiction. "It gives them a new chance," Mr. Lemmerling said. "And you can see, the majority are willing to take that chance."

Eileen, 51, who has been working at Bon Appetit since October, is getting ready to leave Crawford House this month. She recalled her previous work over the years in restaurants and as an innkeeper as she tended to customers on Thursday morning. But none of those experiences, she said, ever helped her remain sober.

"Here," Eileen said, "it's part of my treatment program. ... I don't know how it would be at another job or with employers that don't understand."

Slicing ham and other meats from the store's plentiful selection, Eileen described a program she said has saved her life. With a history of alcoholism but now closing in on six months clean, she explained how she can apply the characteristics she is acquiring through her treatment program — such as patience and maintaining self-esteem — to her work.



Staff photo by Mark Czajkowski

**Danee steams milk for lattes at the coffee bar in Chestnut Tree Books in the Princeton Shopping Center.**

And whether applying Crawford House's treatment methods to the work environment or channeling life skills, Danee and Eileen, as well as the other residents there, are becoming part of the community through the process.

Despite the decades of difference in their age, different addictions and different experiences, both women recognized one thing that is similar — they are growing up together.

"They say we're all sisters because we all grow up in the same house," Eileen said.

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