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From addiction to recovery: Woman ascends from life on the streets to mission of serving others

By Mary Ann Roser

Darylann Torrico had lost everything to crack cocaine: her home, her children and her self-respect. Now, in the early morning blackness of March 11, 2006, she was about to lose her life.

A stranger offering a ride took her instead to a wooded area near Bull Creek Park, off Capital of Texas Highway. He raped her repeatedly. She broke away and frantically tried to flag down the few cars whizzing past at 2:30 a.m. Then she saw the man's white sedan.

Torrico darted across the highway and ran up a hill to a parking garage, the white car in pursuit. Then the man got out, wielding a flashlight and, Torrico said, a gun.

How she got from the bottom of a 30-foot cliff to where she is today is nothing short of miraculous, said the detective who investigated her case and those who helped her recover. "It was grace," said Lynn Goodman-Strauss, who runs the Mary House hospice for the homeless in Austin. "Grace is as simple as keeping a street person alive long enough to allow God to work miracles in her life."

Hitting rock bottom — literally — started Torrico, now 48, on the rugged path to sobriety and a transformation experts called remarkable. Along the way, she changed many of the people who helped her. And then she became a force for change in the lives of other women addicts in the Austin area.

"It makes me think of this flower coming out of the mud and blossoming," said her mother, Florence Burns.

Torrico had been mired in addiction for half of her life. Then she was swallowed by it.

In 1998, "my accountant told me I was a millionaire," she said. By October 2005, "I was living in a box in the woods. And it wasn't even my box."

About 22.1 million Americans 12 and older, or 8.7 percent of that age group, abused or were addicted to drugs in 2010, including 1 million crack addicts, according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health. The cost to society: an estimated \$215 billion. Less than 12 percent get treatment, and of those, 40 to 60 percent relapse, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

As a substance abuser, Torrico had sought treatment four times. She wanted to be a good mother to her three children, but her addictions were too strong.

Dr. Herbert Munden, a former drug abuser who runs an addiction treatment center in Austin, said that although data are not available, he estimates that just 5 to 10 percent of addicts get sober and stay that way without treatment. Crack is cheap, and most abusers don't have access to treatment, he said.

Torrico credits the love of strangers and God's intervention with saving her. She wants other addicts to know there is hope. If she can recover, so can they.

But even after that night six years ago, she still felt the gnawing to get high for months.

Self-medicating

"Most people can't understand that kind of craving," said Carlton Erickson, an addiction expert at the University of Texas. Without help, "a person can't stop using drugs any more than a schizophrenic can stop hearing voices."

Crack causes the pleasure chemical dopamine to rush to the brain, but it lasts less than 15 minutes. As the addict needs more crack to get high, dopamine becomes depleted and depression sets in, Munden said. All the person can think of is that next dose.

Talk therapy, support and medications are key recovery tools, experts said.

Betty Mendl, a Round Rock therapist who worked with Torrico for free and spoke with her permission, said she tries to get to the root of an addiction. Some people have a genetic susceptibility. Others might have experienced trauma or have a mental illness. "So many times what they are trying to do is self-medicate," Mendl said.

Torrico came to her with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and psychological scars from childhood.

Her parents divorced when she was 2, and she and her three siblings were raised by their schoolteacher mother in Pitman, N.J. Supervision was light. "There just wasn't enough of me to go around," said Burns, who now lives in Jensen Beach, Fla.

Between the ages of 7 and 11, Torrico was molested by a friend's father, she and her family said. "It colored her life," her older sister, Camille Boisvert, 52, of Gouldsboro, Maine, said. "When it all came out, she was just becoming a teenager."

Torrico quit school at 15 and got a job baking at a doughnut shop. Her boss drank and shared booze with her. She got hooked on alcohol, moved away and roamed.

Back in New Jersey in her early 20s, she married an engineer. They settled in Austin in 1990.

"Once the children got in school and I was alone, I started drinking all morning," she said. "I would pass out and sober up in time to get the kids, and then he (her then-husband) and I would drink together at night."

The marriage ended in 1999. She got treatment but then discovered the drug that would unravel her.

"The first time I smoked crack," she said, "I didn't come home for three days."

She rented her car out for drug money; the borrowers crashed it. She was spiraling downward. With her ex-husband and children on the phone, she said, "What you need to know is Mommy smokes crack while you're at school, and I am a danger to you." She told them she needed a year apart to get well.

She couch-surfed, sobered up, then lived with an elderly couple as a caregiver. She relapsed, stole from them and ended up on the street.

"For the first 10 days, I didn't bathe or eat," she said. "I just smoked crack and wandered."

On the edge of a cliff

That's a familiar story, said William Moyers, son of newsman Bill Moyers and author of "Broken: My Story of Addiction and Redemption."

"I ended up in a crack house in Atlanta, Ga., while working as a journalist for CNN," said Moyers, now a vice president at the Hazelden treatment program in Minnesota. "I was on the cusp of losing everything. I was standing on the same cliff she was standing on."

Addiction does not discriminate, he said. It "is a disease of the mind, the body and the spirit."

A native Texan, Moyers sought treatment four times before he was able to get off crack 18 years ago. "There really is only one bottom with addiction, and that is death," he said. "If we don't recover, we die."

Even though Torrico was on the streets, she had not yet hit her bottom. She shared a friend's cardboard box in the woods and lived for crack.

The night she was attacked in 2006, she was looking for more.

As the rapist chased her through the woods, Torrico reached the edge of a cliff.

She could see water and estimated the distance at five feet. She jumped. Austin Detective Jeff Greenwalt said she actually fell 20 to 30 feet into a shallow creek. On the way down, a tree branch impaled her thigh, tearing deep inside her leg but breaking her fall.

Hiding in a thicket with a broken back, seven broken ribs, a broken left arm, a dislocated right elbow, a 10-inch gash on her leg and two collapsed lungs, she managed not to cry or gasp for breath.

"He looked for me for four hours," Torrico said.

She had attempted suicide before, she said, and "I wondered whether it would be better if he shot me."

She believes she then heard God say, "You're not going to die tonight, and you're never going to want to die again. There's work to be done." And she knew what it would be.

Finding advocates

That morning, swim club coach Tim O'Brien had sent two of his students for a run near Bull Creek Park. The boys heard Torrico cry out. One held her hand; the other ran for help.

STAR Flight airlifted her to University Medical Center Brackenridge, where O'Brien, swim team members and their families often visited, bearing flowers and treats. "It touched us all," O'Brien said.

Soon, Torrico saw a face from her past.

Greenwalt was at her hospital bedside, asking questions. They had met in 2002 when he responded to a marital squabble over her drug use, one of several run-ins Torrico had had with the law. He wanted to find her attacker and "was the first person who treated me with respect," she said.

On March 17, six days after her arrival, hospital staffers discussed discharging her. Her body and arms were in casts. She could hardly walk and had nowhere to go.

O'Brien found Goodman-Strauss, who is known for helping the homeless. She went to the hospital at his urging. Furious, Goodman-Strauss demanded Torrico be kept at the hospital longer before she would take her to Mary House. Goodman-Strauss also fired off letters to the Catholic bishop and hospital chief. Torrico stayed four more days, her medical records show.

Kate Henderson, chief operating officer of UMC Brackenridge, said Torrico received excellent physical and emotional care. The discussions about discharging her were to prepare her for departure, not to release her that day, she said.

Goodman-Strauss said meeting Torrico inspired her to become an outspoken advocate for homeless patients. "She saved my life," Torrico said.

O'Brien said he, too, was changed by the friendship. The swim team adopted the hospice, helping with chores, O'Brien said. Today, the swim club continues service projects.

"It makes you realize no matter how down somebody is, there's good in them," he said. "You just never give up on a person."

Torrico spent five months at Mary House recovering from her wounds, including a grossly infected leg that required another surgery. She also started the long process of recovering from addiction and healing emotionally.

She called her family and started attending an addiction support group.

"She finally wanted to take care of herself," her sister said. "She also talked about wanting to help others."

But she still craved crack, which is not uncommon, addiction experts said.

At Mary House one day, "my addict turned on," Torrico said. She stole two Vicodin doses. But that night she dreamed that God told her she would be OK.

She woke up resolved to quit prescription drugs. A doctor taught her to manage her pain without them.

'The key to recovery'

In April 2007, Johnny Schneider was attending his regular support group meeting for drug addicts when Torrico walked in. "She had this glow about her," Schneider, 53, said. "I thought, 'That's the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, and I want to spend the rest of my life with her.' "

They moved in together within a month. Schneider told Torrico he wanted to open a house where addicted men could get sober. Torrico said she had the same dream, for women.

With money Schneider inherited, the couple opened a men's recovery home in August 2007, and the following year, they opened Joyce Grace house for women.

"I am filled with the gratitude of being alive and sober," Torrico wrote in one of her frequent letters to her sister during this period, "and fulfilling my goal in life — to work with women from the streets, women who are lost and broken and looking for a way out," like she had been.

A second house for women, Lydia Grace, opened in August 2010, and two months ago, the men's house was converted to Emma Grace house for women. Each of the three South Austin houses has seven beds, with one dedicated to a person who has no money. Torrico mentors and encourages the residents. She speaks to groups and later this month will keynote a fundraiser for homeless shelters in Houston.

"Helping others is the key to recovery," Schneider said. "Without it, we would be focused on ourselves."

The houses don't make much money, he said. Residents who can afford it pay \$600 to \$700 a month and must enter a recovery program.

Torrico gets \$1,000 a month, and Schneider works as a plumber and leases out a duplex, which helps pay the bills.

"Yes, I'm broke," he said, "but I'm the richest man (because of) the lives we help."

Torrico and Greenwalt talk about once a year. Her turnaround gives him a boost, he said. He doesn't hear many stories like it.

The rapist was never found. His DNA "has not matched up to anything," Greenwalt said.

Torrico worked to repair her broken relationships and won the admiration of her mother and sister.

Mendl, the therapist, said, "she has made me a better therapist. She has helped me to understand addiction."

Torricono said Mendl was among those who made her see she was worth saving.

"I had spent most of my adult life trying to kill myself in one way or another," Torricono said. "I received as truth that I was God's holy masterpiece, as are we all."

Six years ago this week, a man tried to kill Torricono. Instead, she said, "he saved my life."

About this story

At Thanksgiving, Lynn Goodman-Strauss, operator of a hospice for the homeless, sent out an email describing Darylann Torricono with a pseudonym as an example of someone who inspires her and gives back to her community. Torricono later agreed to tell her story. Health and medical reporter Mary Ann Roser reviewed hundreds of pages of documents, including Torricono's hospital records (obtained with her help) and police records, obtained from public information requests. Torricono shared more than 100 letters between herself and her sister, written over a three-year period, and the manuscript of what she hopes will one day be a book. Interviews were conducted with more than 15 people, including addiction experts and three of Torricono's family members.

Abuse and addiction by the numbers

22.1 million Americans 12 and older, or 8.7 percent and 6.3 percent of Texans, abuse substances

2.6 million substance abusers and addicts received treatment in 2010

66,935 Texans in 2010 were admitted to a state-funded treatment facility

6,015 Texans were admitted for crack addiction

447 Texans died from cocaine abuse in 2010

Note: Numbers from 2010, the most recent data available

Sources: U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2010; National Institute on Drug Abuse; National Drug Threat Assessment 2010; Addiction Research Institute, University of Texas

In the U.S. ...

15 million abuse alcohol

4.5 million abuse marijuana, the top illicit drug abused

1.9 million abuse pain relievers, the second most abused

1 million abuse cocaine, including crack, which is No. 3

In 2010...

1 million Americans were treated for marijuana use

754,000 were treated for pain reliever use

699,000 were treated for cocaine

Note: Numbers from 2010, the most recent data available

Sources: U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 2010; National Institute on Drug Abuse; National Drug Threat Assessment 2010; Addiction Research Institute, University of Texas