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DISPATCHES: THE CHANGING AMERICAN DREAM

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From Near Death to Director, Ex-Inmate Opens Transitional Living Center

Shirley LaMarr opened Mz Shirliz Transitional Living after her life was saved through a rehabilitation program.

By [Audrey Arthur](#) | [Email the author](#) | September 15, 2011

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About this column: We're exploring how a difficult economy is affecting the well-being of all of us in articles called Dispatches: The Changing American Dream.

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Who are other inspirational individuals you know who have turned their lives around? [Tell us in the comments.](#)

Shirley LaMarr lives a life of vibrancy that can only truly be appreciated by those who have felt the most debilitating darkness. Marked by a past of heroine addiction, negligent parenting, terrorizing violence, prostitution and homelessness, LaMarr measures the beauty of each day alongside the knowledge that without a gracious hand she would be dead.

"I know what the depths of hell feel like," LaMarr said. "I can't explain it, but I can feel it and taste it."

A former inmate, LaMarr said her life was transformed when she was enrolled in the residential rehabilitation service [Delancey Street](#) in San Francisco.

"I would have been dead, there's no doubt in my mind," LaMarr said when she thought of her life without Delancey Street. "I would have killed someone or they would have killed me."

When the program revived her health, mind and self-worth, LaMarr was able to revive the strength inspired by her grandmother and realize her dynamism for assisting those in dire need.

"That little piece had lived in me, so when I went to Delancey Street it was reformed," she said. "My quest or my place was to help people, and when I left that's what I wanted to do."

LaMarr, who has served as the Director of the in-custody program Choices at the [Maquire Correctional Facility](#) for nearly 6 years, opened the doors to Mz. Shirliz Transitional Living Center in Redwood City to provide hope to those who wish to revive their lives.

"This woman, she moves people to places," said Angela Taylor of the inmate reintegration program Achieve 180. "It's emotional who she is and what she means to people."

Taylor looked at LaMarr as the tears began to swell.

"It means something more than what words can mean," she said.

LaMarr, who recently received the Jefferson Award for her service to the community, began her work at Choices nearly 20 years ago, and since then has changed lives. She hopes to continue her unprecedented track record with Mz Shirliz Transitional Living.

“I hope to fill in the gaps of the criminal justice system,” LaMarr said. “And there’s a lot of gaps. A lot of these guys, if they don’t find a safe place they’re likely to fall prey.”

The 501(c)(3) non-profit organization moved into 1718 Broadway Street July 1 to bring a safe, sober environment.

The building, illuminated with floor to ceiling windows, provides shelter and food and includes a computer lab where residents will be tutored in computer programs and have the ability to attend workshops on how to create a resume.

“Many people know how to do simple stuff like social network sites,” said volunteer Marc Shoolman who set up the computer lab in the housing center. “But it’s a lot different when you have to fill out an application on Monster.com.”

LaMarr said she assists individuals with circumstances they may not be familiar with including obtaining a copy of one’s birth certificate, the proper identification needed for employment or the appropriate attire for an interview.

The organization will also begin yoga classes, a GED program and currently holds monthly support groups but is in no way meant to be a substitute for long-term care.

There are only a few requirements in order to be admitted to the transitional housing center.

“They have to be fighting to stay clean and sober,” LaMarr said.

For LaMarr, the development of the organization evokes pride and nostalgia.

“I dreamed about this from the moment I graduated from Delancey,” LaMarr said.

Her CFO Chris O’Dell has stood by her side and assisted her through the project’s development.

“I couldn’t love him any more than if I birthed him myself.” LaMarr said.

However, though the project is not focused on creating any type of revenue, the new organization is already feeling financial pressures.

LaMarr took out a loan in order to begin the organization and it currently runs on individual donations.

“We’re struggling really bad because we didn’t get any funding,” LaMarr said. “If we can keep the doors open we can stay self-sufficient.”

The organization will be holding a Flea Market and barbecue September 24 and 25 to raise funds for their mission.

“I know what it’s like to forge your way up and get up that mountain,” LaMarr said. “You then can grab that and use that to help others stand up.”

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COMMENTS (6)

[Susan Swope](#)

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10:35am on Thursday, September 15, 2011

Kudos to Shirley LaMarr for opening more transitional housing! If every released inmate who needs it had transitional housing, where they could be supported in staying clean and sober, and learn the skills to get and hold an honest job, we could probably halve the recidivism rate.

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[gail lynch](#)

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11:16pm on Tuesday, September 20, 2011

Where is the barbecue?

Reply

[Chris O'Dell](#)

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10:42am on Thursday, September 22, 2011

the barbecue is at the flea market, 1270 Marshall Street, Redwood City saturday and Sunday 8-4 pm

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[Bob Cancilla](#)

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10:27am on Friday, October 7, 2011

I have know Ms. LeMarr since she started working with Choices Program at the Women's Jail in Redwood City. She is one powerful lady who starts off each day with a mission " to help anyone that is motivated to help themself." I am proud to call Shirley my friend and will soon be dropping by to visit her new program on Broadway, in Redwood City. Keep up the good work Shirley, you are an angel.

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[thomas guevara](#)

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10:34am on Saturday, October 22, 2011

my name is thomas guevara i wanna said tanktou to mom shirley lamarr beacuse she is for me like mom she give me the oportunity to change my life arown she make me to see my life diferent. now i am happy and at diferent person living my dignnity and prout myself

Reply



[Stacie Chan](#)

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7:16pm on Sunday, October 23, 2011

Hi Thomas, that's so great to hear. In these tough times, it's so inspiring to hear these individual stories. I had the pleasure of running into Shirley at Starbucks Friday, and just from that one meeting I could tell she really is a person who is changing the community for the better. We can all learn a lesson from Ms. Lamarr!

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