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IN UNUSUAL REHAB PROGRAM, WOMEN LEARN TO BE MOTHERS--AND THEIR CHILDREN LEARN TO TRUST.

BYLINE: SONIA NAZARIO, TIMES URBAN AFFAIRS WRITER

BODY:

In a two-story apartment building in the core of Compton, something magical is happening.

Children are playing. Moms are cooking. Souls are healing.

"We're like the damn Brady Bunch," says Beatrice McClendon--amazing words from a woman who not so long ago was spending more time with her crack pipe than with her children.

Beatrice and dozens of other mothers have found redemption inside the 86-unit apartment complex known as Keith Village, where parents and children are taught to resume their respective roles, once warped by drugs.

Eleven-year-old Ladonna Grant used to care for seven younger siblings while her mother, Jacqueline, was chasing cocaine around the clock. Now, when Jacqueline asks her daughter to watch the kids for a few minutes, Ladonna says simply: "Uh-uh. I got to play now." She dashes outside for a date with a jump rope.

While such mother-daughter exchanges may seem unremarkable in most households, they are practically a miracle for the families at Keith Village--one of the nation's most novel and successful residential recovery programs.

Keith Village specializes in the toughest cases: long-term addicts, some of them third-generation substance abusers, each of whom has up to 10 children, many of them troubled.

The program's premise is that to make families whole, they must be mended as a unit through intensive counseling for mothers stunted by years of addiction and children brimming with anger from the neglect they endured.

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On average, about 50 women and 250 children receive two years of treatment and may continue living in the facility another two years while they head into the working world.

About 40 graduates, whose chief job used to be scoring drugs, now work at AT&T, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the post office and elsewhere.

"There are incredible things that happen to families here," says Kathryn S. Icenhower, executive director of SHIELDS for Families Inc., the nonprofit organization that purchased and runs Keith Village. "We teach folks they can be whoever they want to be."

During individual and group counseling sessions, mothers dissect the painful events that have often fueled their addictions--physical abuse, domestic violence, sexual abuse and the resulting low self-esteem. They also are coached on the more mundane, but wholly unfamiliar, details of daily survival: how to pay bills, run a household, do laundry.

The children, meanwhile, participate in their own counseling. From tots to teenagers, they discuss how to feel good about themselves, how to control their tempers and how to avoid becoming addicts, halting the ruinous cycle that has cost them and society so dearly.

"They won't become sitcom-perfect," senior child psychologist Donald Jackson says of the Keith Village youngsters. "We try to fertilize that natural resiliency children have. We bombard them with affection and consistency."

Some have rebounded so well they have become honor students. Even the littlest ones have rallied--to the degree they can.

Ronnie Simmons, 2, was nearly lifeless when he entered the world. His mother, Sheila, smoked crack daily during the latter part of pregnancy, following the death of her twin brother and after catching her husband of 14 years in bed with another woman.

Of the infant growing inside her, she says: "I was trying to kill him and me."

When Ronnie was born at home, it took 15 minutes for him to gulp any air, leaving his brain permanently damaged. For months, his voice box didn't work. When he cried, there was no sound.

Now Ronnie tries to pull himself up and flashes his mother a huge smile, a monumental breakthrough. Thanks to therapy, Ronnie no longer lies all day with his eyes rolled back. Today, he is a more physically active, verbal boy.

"He like a flower," his mother says. "He just blooming."

So is she.

'You Gotta Stop Being Selfish'

The fears women confront in the clarity of sobriety--and the deep understanding they get at Keith Village--are evident one Monday morning as 28 mothers sit in a circle around the living room of apartment No. 1736, the main meeting room for group sessions.

Counselor Rafik Philobos throws it open to discussion.

Hattie Wilson, 47, who has been abusing drugs for three decades, says she's having problems with one of her four sons, a hardheaded 12-year-old currently in the care of her sister. The boy irritates her, Hattie says, and she's not sure she wants him back. "I just want to shake him," she says.

"At some point you have to be a mama," one of the women says. "At some point you gotta stop being selfish."

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Another woman--a mother of three with one more on the way--chimes in: "I ain't never been ready. But I have to do for these kids because no one else is going to do for them. I know I'm their mother. I laid down and had them babies."

Yet another ex-junkie, this one with seven children, says she is immensely thankful to have been reunited with five of her youngsters--for their sake and hers.

"I have to get up," she says, "get them dressed, take them to school. I'm real grateful."

"Why keep putting it off? Make yourself ready," another woman demands.

Sobbing now, Hattie rocks back and forth in her chair, her hands covering her eyes. "I want my baby. I'll have to get ready."

Then comes an offer from a woman who, like everyone else in the room, could once think only of getting loaded; she says she'd be happy to baby-sit the boy whenever Hattie is feeling overwhelmed. Hattie nods in appreciation.

One Tuesday morning, eight women, with their babies and children in tow, gather for a "Mommy and Me" class. Topics include discipline, patience, verbal abuse, even brushing teeth. But no matter what the subject, child-care worker Edith Ward says the women must be guided by one divine realization.

"The Lord has given you another chance to be mothers, truly mothers, not just give birth," she tells them. "You have enough love for all of them. Teach them the right way. Read to them. Dance with them.

"Instead of the curse words, teach them the ABCs. Just enrich their lives with knowledge. . . . Enrich your life too with all these things."

The results of this advice, when translated into action, can surface in ways subtle and spectacular.

It can be seen in the genuine joy that ripples through the complex when a woman reclaims her child from a relative, the hospital or foster care. It can be heard in the voices of moms talking about going to a child's open house at school, of making breakfast without getting stoned first, of paying the rent on time.

Tracy Mills used to tie up her six children so they wouldn't bother her when she was smoking crack. Now listen to her as she cradles one of a dozen babies in the nursery, amid the faint strains of Beethoven: "I'm gonna fill you up," Tracy tells the boy, gently patting his back. "Then, I gonna burp you."

An Impressive Record of Recovery

Keith Village was the brainchild of two women, Icenhower, who had worked for Los Angeles County's Alcohol and Drug Program Administration, and Xylina Bean, head of the neonatal unit at Martin Luther King Jr./Drew Medical Center.

Bean became increasingly frustrated as she watched the hospital deliver more than 1,000 crack babies in 1989. By 1993, about 20% of all babies born there had been exposed to drugs in the womb, their bodies shaking from withdrawal in the hospital's neonatal intensive care unit.

That same year, in response to the crack epidemic and the woefully small number of treatment facilities for women, dozens of pilot programs were funded. Keith Village decided to focus as much on the children as on their addicted mothers.

When scouting locations, Icenhower and Bean came across the almost new Compton apartment building named Keith Village. At the time, its garage was a drive-through crack market.

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Dealers slashed the tires of employees of the SHIELDS organization as the purchase neared. Icenhower received a note warning that the same would happen to her body if the South-Central Los Angeles group did not back off.

She would not be intimidated. Familiar with the underpinnings of South-Central street power, she mobilized members of the Crips gang whose mothers worked for SHIELDS. The threats abruptly ended.

A federal allotment of \$ 1.2 million--which will end next September--provides the bulk of Keith Village's operating funds, with the rest coming from five other government grants. Tenants use their welfare payments for rent.

Since opening four years ago, Keith Village has compiled an impressive record of recovery. About seven in 10 women graduate drug-free, a number eclipsing many other residential treatment programs, according to one study. Among such programs in Los Angeles County, about one in four graduate.

Keith Village's methods also represent a break with the more traditional, male-focused programs that use "attack therapy," in which patients are placed in the middle of a room while counselors and others try to punch through years of denial.

"People in addiction have been through enough demeaning and demoralizing things," says Keith Village senior case manager Da-Londa Groenow. "They don't need to be attacked. They need to understand that if they change their attitude and behavior, they can lead a successful life. . . . We pick them up, dust them off, and show them another way to do it."

That attitude extends to relapse. Although many programs give patients the boot after one slip, some Keith Village residents have relapsed as many as four times.

"How do you learn if you aren't allowed to fall and make mistakes?" says senior counselor Patricia Wallace. "We allow them time to grow, to learn that they are someone."

Julie Rogers, 33, entered Keith Village a prisoner of PCP and crack. She was so obsessed that when her father had a grand mal seizure, a chronic problem, she pulled his wallet from his pocket, grabbed a \$ 20 bill and headed for the dope man, leaving her father convulsing on the ground.

After she entered Keith Village in June 1996, the obsession continued. In the ensuing weeks, she logged five dirty tests. "The drug puts your brain in a fog so thick you cannot see," Julie says.

But by then she could feel the faint glow of recovery. In the darkness of a drug den, she would call Keith Village Executive Director Deborah Harris, sobbing, "Lord help me! I can't help myself!" Deborah would retrieve her, even though other tenants wanted her ousted.

Julie says the staff's persistence saved her life. "They saw hope. I didn't see any."

Unlike many treatment facilities, which are locked, Keith Village preaches freedom, forcing women to confront the worldly temptations that helped bring them down. The underground parking structure, where women must venture to take out their trash every night, still remains a hangout for neighborhood youngsters who sell and smoke drugs.

Despite its openness and leniency, the program is not without rules. For example, women in their first 30 days at Keith Village must be escorted by a peer when they leave the grounds. In surprise midnight raids, counselors troll for drugs or boyfriends hidden in closets or under beds. Everyone is subject to random weekly drug tests. Curfew most nights is 10 p.m.

Husbands and boyfriends must attend Thursday night counseling sessions before being approved for weekend overnight visits.

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Keith Village's approach isn't for everyone; those who need a more structured, locked-down program are sent to one. But for most, Keith Village's strong sense of community is enough, providing the kind of support and honesty missing for years in the women's lives, if it ever existed.

When a very pregnant Sabrina Calbert recently arrived, she was greeted by women offering their own blankets, clothing, food and something much more valuable--sobriety.

Thinking about a trip to the liquor store--but not wanting to flunk the chemical test--Sabrina asked one of the women how long alcohol would stay in her system.

"I told her if she want her baby she better go sit her ass down and stop thinkin' about that beer," recalls Keith Village resident Patricia Haley.

The lecture stuck. "I went home and went to sleep," says Sabrina.

Children's Anger Is Deeply Rooted

While success stories abound at Keith Village, they are not easily achieved--especially among the teenagers who are deeply distrustful of their mothers.

Some take sips of every glass of water or soda their mothers drink to make sure they're not spiked.

When Richella Glover, 29, goes to the bathroom, her three oldest children line up by the door and knock to make sure she's not reverting back to old dope routines.

Patricia Haley, 38, has given up trying to get the five children who live with her to sleep in the apartment's three bedrooms. She puts padding around the living room couch where she sleeps, surrounded by her kids on the floor.

Many children are not only distrustful, but deeply resentful about their mothers' past conduct and about being forced once again to adapt to their mothers' lives.

Some have been hustling on the streets for themselves and their siblings for years. It is hard for many to dredge up respect for a parent who sold herself for drugs or who neglected or physically abused them.

Tina Zayas, 12, complains that when her mother was drugged she always wanted the kids out of the house. Now that her mom is at Keith Village, she won't let them outside alone. "She keeps us in the house all the time," Tina grouches.

This anger spills into the center's programs for children. Some refuse to follow directions, heaving objects and throwing tantrums. "They have the most primal, basic thing wrong with them: their mom," says psychologist Jackson. "They know their mom is damaged and flawed."

The gnawing guilt that many mothers feel further complicates the recovery process.

Lydia Zayas, 40, who is training to become a medical assistant, pulls three Polaroid snapshots from an envelope--haunting reminders of the bottom she hit.

Three years ago, while five months pregnant, Lydia says she could feel something going terribly wrong with her body but could not stop smoking crack to go to the hospital. When she did, the next day, her baby boy was stillborn.

Outraged, the hospital staff gave her the gruesome photos, an imprint of the dead infant's footprints and the blanket in which he was wrapped, to remind her of the real price she paid for crack.

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"I think about stuff like that more than ever now," says Lydia, who has six living children. "I think I was a sick person."

Some children play heavily on such guilt, demanding that their affection be bought with material possessions long denied--a demand with which numerous mothers readily comply.

In reality, however, the wounds often are too deep for such superficial treatment.

Damantha Morris, 32, hadn't seen her two sons for eight years. Driven by guilt, she retrieved the boys, ages 16 and 11, from their father, who had been drinking a lot.

Damantha took them to movies and indulged them with presents, especially her younger son, Daymeon. For two months, he was an angel, arriving home well before his curfew. Then all hell broke loose. He called his mother a bitch to her face and got suspended from school.

"He said: 'I don't want to be with you. I can't stand you. If I have to steal in the liquor store to get away from you, I will,'" his mother recalls.

He began running away, and kicked a Keith Village staffer. "I don't know my mom. How dare she say she's my mom," he angrily told Keith Village counselor Patricia Wallace.

Finally, his mother snapped, hitting Daymeon with a belt several times. Early this year, he was placed in a foster home.

Meanwhile, the older son, Terrance, was convicted of stealing a car. By then, he had been stealing for some time, including food to feed himself and his younger brother. "I thought it was the thing to do," he said during a conversation one summer day. "The people I hung with were doing it."

Although Terrance says he is trying to love his mother, "I'm not sure she'll be there for me."

A few days later, Terrance was picked up by police for allegedly participating in a drive-by shooting.

More often than not, however, the endings at Keith Village are happier, despite rocky starts.

Before Beatrice McClendon's daughter had turned 2, she was being left alone all night while her mother was out smoking crack.

As the girl, Kemia, grew older, she would spend hours searching alleys for her mother, including on the night of her junior high school graduation.

One night, pregnant at 14, Kemia went hunting, hoping that her mother would be moved by the impending birth of a grandchild.

"Mama, if you love me, you'll come home now!" Kemia screamed as Beatrice sat by a trash bin. Although Kemia repeatedly told her mother that she loved her, "it didn't help none." In fact, when Kemia went into labor, her mother showed up and swiped the girl's gold hoop earrings from her lobes and removed a chain from around her neck, selling them for drugs.

Eventually, Beatrice strung together 17 months of sobriety, but relapsed. "She had just started to trust me, and I went and got loaded on her," Beatrice says of her daughter. In a parenting class at Keith Village, Kemia, staring into her mother's eyes, said: "Sometimes, I wish you were dead."

The tables had been turned. "I would ask her to do something," Beatrice says, and "she would suck in her teeth and

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back-talk." The mother responded one night to Kemia's disobedience by whipping her with a telephone cord.

"I wasn't used to her being there as a mother," says Kemia. But she knew that to save their relationship, she too "had to change."

With the help of Keith Village counselors, both have given a mile.

Kemia now volunteers to baby-sit her mother's new baby so she can attend Cocaine Anonymous meetings. Beatrice, for her part, curses less and treats her daughter with more respect and appreciation for all she's been through. Both savor the moments when they play cards together or paint their fingernails.

As mom steps outside one Saturday night on her way to a "sober" dance, Kemia shoots her a motherly look, eyeing Beatrice's low-cut blouse. "You showing too much there," she says, smiling warmly, and then fastens a few more buttons.

"I'm starting to see a glow in my daughter," Beatrice boasts. "Like she's happy."

Inspired by her mother and Keith Village counselors, Kemia has returned to high school, where her grades have shot up from Fs to Bs. Kemia has promised her mother she will work hard to become a nurse or doctor. "She's my inspiration. I want to graduate. I want to go to the prom for my mama."

On Graduation Day, a Round of Advice

One Friday, 37 women are arranged in a large circle in the community room, ready to begin a Keith Village graduation ritual called the "coin out."

The women pass each other a silver coin. One side says, "One Day at a Time." The other is inscribed with a prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference."

As the coin moves from hand to hand, each woman offers advice to several graduates, who have completed their recovery program at Keith Village but will live there as alumni.

Addressing one of the graduates who has had trouble reuniting with her children, one woman says: "Don't give up on them. Fight for them." Another woman says her door will always be open.

The sniffing begins.

"Here we go!" someone yells.

A roll of toilet paper works its way around the circle.

"Don't get big-headed," another woman advises.

The graduate, dabbing her eyes, responds, "I do know one thing: I don't have to use no matter what. And I'm thankful."

Then it's time for encouraging words for another of the graduates. "I really glad to see the mother you've grown into," says one of the women in the circle, now holding the coin. "I remember when you said: 'I just want to be a mother to my kids.' Congratulations."

The graduate rocks in her chair, a big smile on her face, tears rolling down her cheeks. Have patience, they tell her, don't worry about bonding with the son with whom she hasn't lived for eight years.

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"You a good mother!" one of the women says. "Yes you are!" everyone in the crowd chimes in.

Now, half the crowd is sobbing.

Says the graduate, her voice husky with emotion: "My goal is to graduate from high school. This is about change and moving on with life."

Finally, the half-dollar-size coin comes to rest with a woman who offers some sobering thoughts to a graduate with dreams of being a nurse.

"Never be ashamed of where you been," she says. "Just be conscientious of where you're going."

For three hours this goes on, an emotional outpouring among women who only a few years back had one friend in their lives: drugs. In the end, it was their enemy.

Where to Get Help

If you have a problem with drugs or alcohol:

* Narcotics Anonymous, World Service Office, Chatsworth, 818-773-9999

* Alcoholics Anonymous, World Services Inc., New York City, 212-870-3400; Los Angeles, 213-936-4343.

* Cocaine Anonymous,

Los Angeles, 800-347-8998, 310-216-4444. On the Web: <http://www.ca.org>

* Self-Help and Recovery Exchange, Los Angeles, 310-305-8878

* National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence, Washington, D.C., 800-NCA-CALL

* U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, National Drug and Alcohol Treatment Referral Service, Washington, D.C., 800-662-HELP

* Marijuana Anonymous, World Services, Van Nuys, 800-766-6779.

* The Other Bar

(an organization for addicted lawyers), 800-222-0767.

* Women for Sobriety, Quakertown, Pa., 215-536-8026

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If you are a family member of a person who has a problem with drugs or alcohol:

* Families Anonymous, Culver City, 800-736-9805 or 310-313-5800

* Nar-Anon Family Group Headquarters Inc., Palos Verdes Peninsula, 310-547-5800.

* Al-Anon, Virginia Beach, Va., 800-356-9996; Los Angeles, 818-760-7122.

* Co-Anon,

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Los Angeles, 818-377-4317

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If you are the child of a person who has a problem with drugs or alcohol:

* National Association for Children of Alcoholics, Rockville, Md., 301-468-0985 or 888-554-2627.

On the Web:

www.health.org/nacoa

* Adult Children of Alcoholics, Torrance, 310-534-1815; in Los Angeles, 818-342-9863

* Alateen and Alatot, Virginia Beach, Va., 800-356-9996; Los Angeles, 818-760-7122

* Children of Alcoholics Foundation, New York City, 800-359-COAF

* National Association for Native American Children of Alcoholics, Seattle, 800-322-5601.

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If you suspect a drug addict or alcoholic is abusing their children:

* Child Abuse or Neglect Hotlines (Anonymity is possible if requested.)

* Los Angeles County, 800-540-4000

* Orange County, 714-938-0505

* Riverside County, 800-442-4918

* San Bernardino County, 909-350-4949

* Ventura County, 805-654-3200

About This Series

Times urban affairs writer Sonia Nazario and staff photographer Clarence Williams spent five months chronicling the tortured lives of children living with drug addicts and alcoholics. Nazario and Williams spent day and night with many of these families during the summer months--a snapshot in time intended to show the kind of existence such youngsters confront throughout their formative years.

Sunday's story focused on the personal tragedies and obstacles faced by substance-abusing families; today's piece offers an inspiring look at a treatment program that has given families a fresh start.

On the Web

The complete series, including additional photos and a discussion area, is available on the Times Web site today. Go to: <http://www.latimes.com/orphans/>

GRAPHIC: PHOTO: Former crack addict Patricia Haley naps with daughter Kiesha. At night her children, who fear she might relapse, sleep around her. **PHOTOGRAPHER:** CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times **PHOTO:**

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Malia Tunai watches her sleeping 3-month-old son, Jonathan Buckner, on his first day at home with her in Keith Village. Jonathan had been hospitalized with severe medical problems since birth. PHOTOGRAPHER: CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times PHOTO: During one of the many therapy sessions that are part of life at Keith Village, Kellie Chandler, left, Beatrice McClendon, center, and Venita Washington show a range of emotions. With the help of counseling, McClendon and her daughter have slowly forged a loving relationship, after years of bitterness and neglect. PHOTOGRAPHER: CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times PHOTO: Residents of Keith Village start the day with a group meditation as 19-month-old Malachi Walker waves happily. "We try to fertilize that natural resiliency children have. We bombard them with affection and consistency," senior child psychologist Donald Jackson says of the Keith Village youngsters. PHOTOGRAPHER: CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times PHOTO: Dominique Oliver, 5, peers at a globe during an African dance class that also included lessons in history and self-respect. Whether tots or teenagers, the children are taught how to handle their anger and avoid becoming addicts themselves, halting a ruinous cycle. PHOTOGRAPHER: CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times PHOTO: Beatrice McClendon receives some final touches to her outfit from her daughter Kemia before heading out to a dance for recovering addicts and alcoholics. PHOTOGRAPHER: CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times PHOTO: During an emotional pre-graduation ceremony, Latanya Morris, left, shares a hug with Tammi Jones. Both women were honored during the ceremony. PHOTOGRAPHER: CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times

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