



## Opinion

**When women see themselves in a new light**

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Contrary to the adage, seeing isn't always believing. Sometimes seeing is disbelieving, as when a woman looks in the mirror and wonders what happened to the person she used to be. This isn't about vanity — the sudden appearance of lines and wrinkles or a sagging jawline. I'm talking about the haunted, broken look of a woman who has been a prisoner, drug addict or victim of abuse who has somehow become unrecognizable to herself.

How did she become that other person, and how does she now become someone else? These are among the questions that haunt the women who enter the Lovelady Center in Birmingham, Ala., a faith-based rehabilitation program. Most, almost invariably, leave full of hope and a renewed sense of self.

Lovelady was founded in 2004 and welcomes women into its program straight from prison, sometimes because of court orders and sometimes through self-admittance. Many are teen mothers who were born to teen mothers. Many are drug addicts or prostitutes. Most have suffered abuse in one form or another. The center, which houses and feeds several hundred women and 60 children, is for many the last stop on a road that was leading nowhere.

My accidental encounter with the center came in June when I wandered into a North Carolina mountain lodge and was greeted with walls covered with a traveling exhibit of beautiful portraits of women by obviously accomplished artists. Some of the portraits were side-by-side with photos of the women taken in their previous lives — their faces topographical histories of pasts filled with the worst life has to offer.

All the women captured in the portraits had lived at Lovelady. And you could bet none of them had ever expected to be subjects of portraits — flattering or otherwise. Each painting was by a different artist, who had volunteered his or her talents to the Portrait Project, a mission to show the featured women a better version of themselves — and to give hope to others who might need help reimagining themselves. A collection of the portraits, each accompanied by the women's stories in their own words, is now part of a book titled "[Portraits of Hope](#)."

The Portrait Project was the brainchild of Beverly Blount McNeil, whose husband, John, began working at the center about 10 years ago and is now chairman of the board. Beverly wanted to extend the center's work by helping women see themselves in a more positive, future-filled, light.

It can be hard to become something you've never seen or imagined for yourself until someone draws it for you. And most of these women had only known themselves as losers. My favorite portrait, by artist Daniel Gerhartz, is of a smiling, fuchsia-clad Shay Bell Curry. She's wearing hoop earrings and extending her right hand in a peace sign. Instantly I thought, I need to know this woman. But Curry, who died of complications from liver cancer, didn't get to write her own story.

Instead, her mentor, and founder of the center, Brenda Lovelady Spahn, wrote it for her. She described Curry, the first client to enter the center on the day it opened, as “a bit scary to be around the first couple of days. She was like a keg of dynamite ready to explode.” Sexually abused as a child and physically abused on the streets and in prison, Curry “could not handle simple life,” Spahn wrote.

Eventually, Curry found and reconciled with the two children she had dropped off at her mother’s and sister’s doors. She got married, owned a home and car, and became an involved grandmother. She probably would have been the first to tell you she was saved by God and the Lovelady Center. She also insisted on becoming part of the center’s staff, frequently acting as the first person newcomers met upon their arrival.

To [complete](#) the Lovelady program, attendees must, among other things, stay nine to 12 months and acquire a number of educational and self-help credits (and a GED if needed) as well as attend counseling, a job readiness program and obtain other basics of citizenship. Sobriety is a must.

Curry’s story is remarkable, yes, but it is not unusual. Bobbie Raye Smith told me she was drugged out and was stumbling down a rural dirt road at night, destination unknown, when she heard singing from across a field. She staggered toward the music and entered a church. Taking a seat in a pew, she stayed for the service, after which the minister’s wife approached her and said, “Honey, you need help.”

Smith was at Lovelady the next morning and today sings its praise with a voice that would make a believer out of the stubbornest iconoclast. As adages go, here are two for you: Art can change lives. And the lord works in mysterious ways.