

Former South Carolina inmate returns to prison to help

AP SC State Wire

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Published: Aug 22, 2015

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) - More than a decade ago, Dana Mallette of Columbia - a mother, and a drug addict - was facing prison time for passing bad checks.

Now, thanks to a prison-sponsored program that helped her kick her drug habit, Mallette has returned to South Carolina's corrections system, this time as a therapist helping women who are battling some of the demons she once did.

After several years sliding down the spiral of cocaine use, Mallette was arrested in late 2003 for passing bad checks and ended up in South Carolina's prison system. There, because of her past issues with drugs, she was placed in a special unit where inmates with addiction issues live and work together, attending intensive group therapy sessions.

The program typically encompasses the final months of an inmate's prison stay and is intended to help addicted inmates stay away from temptations - and, hopefully, crime.

"It was so structured," Mallette said. "But I knew that I did not want to go back out there and use."

The program has several phases, according to Dorcas Adedokun, a Nigerian-born therapist employed by the Corrections Department who was instrumental in Mallette's experience. After addressing the meaning of addiction itself, inmates are forced to confront the impact their addictions



In this Aug. 18, 2015 photo provided by the South Carolina Department of Corrections, former inmate Dana Mallette poses inside the Addiction Treatment Unit before she mediates a therapy session with inmates at Camille Griffin Graham Correctional Institution in Columbia, S.C. Mallette, who has returned to work as a therapist inside the system where she was once incarcerated, uses the sessions to teach inmates how to appropriately confront conflict. (Stephanie Givens/South Carolina Department of Corrections via AP)

have had on those around them via group therapy, family visits and attending Narcotics and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings within the prison walls.

"Once they clean the junk out, then they have room for the good stuff to go in," Adedokun said.

Released from prison after six months, Mallette says her first priorities were attending NA meetings, finding a job - and enrolling in school to become a therapist herself.

"SCDC saved my life," she said during a recent interview. "But I never wanted to come back here as an inmate."

Working on her bachelor's and master's degrees, Mallette checked in regularly with Dorcas Adedokun, the Nigerian-born therapist who helped guide her journey through the prison system and into a productive life outside the system. Through that relationship, Mallette returned to prison, this time as part of an internship with a men's addiction therapy program at another institution.

"It's a good feeling to know that you're actually giving back," said Mallette from her office inside a former inmate dorm room, Number 139. "I feel like I'm walking in my calling, finally."

Bryan Stirling, director of South Carolina's prison system, said Mallette's experience "demonstrates that rehabilitation is possible when you're willing to put in the hard work and take advantage of programs and services."

On a recent Wednesday afternoon, Mallette sat in a plastic chair before a semi-circle of several dozen women, decked out in the turquoise uniforms of Camille Griffin Graham, a women's prison in Columbia.

Six plastic chairs are set up in rows facing each other directly in front of Mallette. Reading from scraps of paper inmates have deposited into a special box, Mallette calls an inmate forward and asks who would like to confront her with criticism, like being disrespectful to others in class or having an overall bad attitude.

Drawing on her own experience, Mallette challenges the inmate on her understanding of the instructions she's accused of violating.

"You've got to follow instructions," Mallette says, firmly. "Those are little small instructions. That's where problems start."

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