

Tahira Malik lost almost everything to addiction. Now, she's making a difference.

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After a car accident in 1999, life as Tahira Malik knew it came to a halt.

The use of pain medication developed into dependency, and dependency developed into addiction. The drugs expanded, from painkillers to other drugs. And the steady, grinding decline of her life replaced what had been a remarkable trajectory.

Growing up in Milwaukee's inner city, Malik was raised in a traditional Islamic household. Her mother stayed home; her father worked as an educator in Milwaukee Public Schools. She attended 8th Street Middle School and St. Joan Antida High School, where she was part of the forensics team and drama club. She became senior class president.

After high school, she attended Alverno College, graduating in 1997 with a degree in social sciences and certificates in psychology and professional communication. Within a year, she became program director of Sponsor-A-Scholar, a program run at the time by the YMCA of the Metropolitan Milwaukee to help youth prepare for college.

Along the way, she became a mother.

But by 2002, her addiction led to losing her job and home. She had two more children – all three of whom needed to be taken care of by her parents.

In 2012, Malik was arrested for possession of drugs and sent to the Milwaukee County House of Correction, now known as the Community Reintegration Center. She found herself among other women whose lives had collapsed.

“It was five of us that really banded together,” she told the [Journal Sentinel](#). “When I met women like myself ... we became each other’s support system. Yes, we were in a dire situation, but it doesn’t matter if your mindset is: I am trying to recover.”

Malik and the other women found creative ways to do each other’s hair and eyebrows, and encouraged each other to eat and stay healthy.

“It was big because when you live in addiction, you stop caring about yourself and lose so much weight ... It was what we needed in order to feel better about ourselves” she said. “There was hope in that.”

What brought Malik through her addiction was her faith.

“I cried out to God, ‘I am so tired of living my life like this — if you get me out, I promise you, I am not going back and he got me out. But not only did he get me out, he made me stronger to be able to walk into the world and help others.’”

But Malik noticed a depressing trend among the women who had shorter sentences.

They often weren't out of confinement long.

“They put in all this work to rebuild their mind, to rebuild their spirit, and they go back out into the world and sometimes within days or weeks, they’d be back in. They would say they had nowhere else to go except the same environment,” she said.

Malik thought about what she could do to help.

“I sat there and I said ‘You know what? I want to provide a place for women to recover. If they truly want that recovery, let’s provide a safe space for them to recover.’ That’s how Samad’s House came about.”

Losing best friend was a jolt, and an inspiration

Malik was released from the House of Correction in 2013.

“When I came home, I was trying to rebuild my life — myself, my family — so my hopes, my dreams, my business plans, I put those on hold,” she said.

While Malik focused on rebuilding her life, addiction affected loved ones around her.

She lost her cousin. Then her uncle. And then her best friend.

“I lost my best friend in 2018 to drug overdose. We were raising our children together, we hung out – even when I was in recovery. She was a beautician so I would allow her do my hair to get money. We would talk about family and laugh and were just best friends.”

Her idea for Samad’s House took on a new urgency.

“Unfortunately, I lost her and that’s what really propelled me to go like: ‘Nope. I’m tired. I can’t keep losing people.’”

Malik visited her best friend’s mother — who helped her organize the program.

“We met every Sunday for a couple of hours and she helped me form Samad’s House. I really wanted her to be on the board because as we bonded over creating something so impactful, it helped our relationship grow. I feel like my best friend had a way in bringing us together to serve a greater purpose.”

According to the Milwaukee County’s [overdose data](#), Milwaukee County has seen nearly a 60% increase in overdose deaths from 2016 to 2020 with 545 deaths recorded in 2020.

To address Milwaukee's overdose epidemic, Malik believes that education is a necessary step.

“We have to teach people what the sign of an overdose looks like and then how to reverse those signs because we are losing way too many people ... We have to have that conversation, normalize the conversation of what addiction looks like: How we can provide help, how we can provide hope and address mental health so that people know they can live another day” Malik said.

Program tries to build hope, self-sufficiency

Samad, an Arabic reference to self-sufficiency, is built into the organization's mission, Malik said.

“The end goal of every woman that comes through our doors is gaining that independence and self-sufficiency,” Malik said.

The lotus flower is the organization’s symbol to help remind those in recovery that there is beauty in the process.

“It’s the lotus flower because up from the mud comes something beautiful. We go through the grime and dirt of addiction and out from that comes the beauty of what we have been through,” Malik said.

Part of Samad's House's mission also is providing people with hope that recovery and sober living is possible.

"It (addiction) doesn't have to be a life sentence, and that is the beauty of what we do – providing that hope," Malik said.

What's next for Samad's House?

Malik said that she would like to provide 12– to 18-month housing for Samad's House alumni who may need extra time finding residency.

"I understand what it feels like to be unstable in housing, so I'd like to provide permanent housing to remove some of those barriers," she said. "I am looking to provide some of the in-house things I've been contracting out—for instance, parenting classes."

Through 120 days of programming for women living at the home, Samad's House offers various resources including nutrition and wellness classes, family and individual counseling and educational development opportunities.

Samad's House started as one home in June 2021 and expanded to two homes in March 2023. It's located near the intersection of North 23rd and West Locust streets.

"The mission grew because the need grew so we were able to open our second home for women and children. In the midst of that, as we recover, as we rebuild our lives mentally, physically and most importantly – spiritually – we have to go and pay it forward. We have to go back out and provide hope for people that may think there is no hope" she said.

Although Samad's House is open just to women, Malik said their mission is to help any individual with addiction.

"We want to help you live another day and when you are ready to take that next step, we'll be right here with you to help you" Malik said.

Malik said more people need to become aware and involved in the fight against Milwaukee's substance abuse and opiate epidemic.

"We need more volunteers, we need more people to come out into the community with us to bring awareness, to help us normalize the conversation and reduce the stigma of addiction."

If you are interested in getting involved with Samad's House as a volunteer or resident, you can check the [website](#) or call (414) 595-6501.