The Power *of* WOMEN

Since 2016, Women Empowering Women has been awarding scholarships and inspiring college women in recovery with a mentorship program to prepare them for a successful life.

By **PATTI ZIELINSKI**

When Amanda Marino got the call that her childhood friend Kim Kinkle had overdosed and was on life support, she rushed to her side. She held hands with the woman she had laughed with at elementary school sleepovers, with whom she had shared secrets as a teen and with whom she struggled alongside in addiction. Then Kinkle died.

And Marino went running.

As her feet pounded the pavement to stamp out her grief, Marino thought about how she had successfully maintained a life in recovery, but Kinkle had not. She thought about Kinkle, trying to get a job but failing due to a felony record. She thought about how she had regained her life, but Kinkle had lost hers.

There must be something good to come of this, she thought. I will honor Kim's memory by helping to give other women in recovery an opportunity to live.

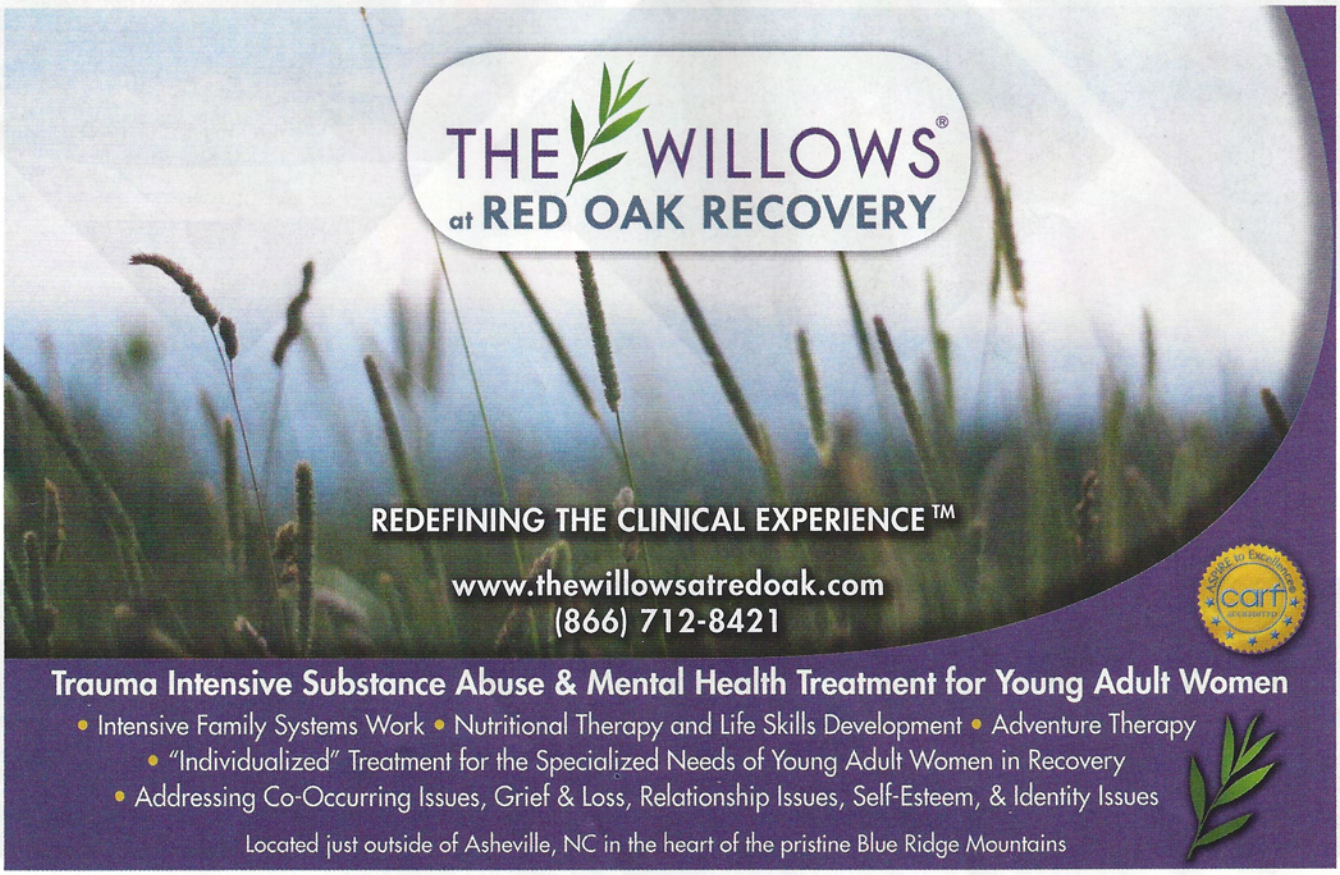
A WAY OUT

Shortly after Kinkle's death in 2015, Marino met with colleagues in the recovery field to discuss how they could raise money to help women in recovery earn a college degree — something that Kinkle was never able to accomplish.

Almost overnight Women Empowering Women was born.

Early in 2016, the organization, based in Palm Beach, Florida, hosted its first behavioral health networking luncheon for women employed in the recovery field. Soon, it became an every-other-month event, with the $25 admission fee feeding the scholarship fund.

"We invited guest speakers to come and give inspirational talks about women's issues in recovery," says Cynthia Weseman, the executive director. "Our attendance just grew. We now have about 75 people at each luncheon — and up to 200 for the scholarship event."



Women Empowering Women quickly became an official 501(c)(3) nonprofit, with a board of directors. By the summer of 2016, it had established a scholarship program at Palm Beach State College.

Since awarding its first scholarship, the organization has expanded to awarding three new $3,000 scholarships each year to students in sustained recovery who demonstrate financial need. The scholarship is renewable until graduation as long as the recipient remains a full-time student with a 3.0 GPA. Competition is stiff: Last year, 32 women qualified. Each year, the Kinkle family personally gives out the scholarships to recipients, and the organization plans on expanding the scholarship to a school near the Kinkle's hometown of Fort Myers, Florida.

"If students meet the criteria, we will continue the scholarship until they graduate. We want them to succeed," says Beth DeRicco, Women Empowering Women vice chair, who notes that a benefit is that the scholarship is unrestricted. "The recipient decides how it should be used, whether it is used for tuition and books or other things like child care and gasoline."

Although preference is given to female students, it is not limited by gender, says Rochelle Nolan, director of major gifts and planned giving at Palm Beach State College. "The Women Empowering Women Scholarship is especially significant because of its comprehensive nature. This scholarship goes beyond tuition to include education-related expenses, such as software packages, lab coats, scrubs or equipment that are necessities," she says. "This type of comprehensive gift allows students in recovery to remain focused on their education without having an undue financial burden on themselves and, of course, on their sobriety."

Recipients are encouraged to take advantage of the Women Empowering Women mentorship program to build skills. "We invite women who attend the luncheons and who had received their degree or a professional certificate after becoming sober to mentor someone in recovery in college," Weseman says. "The mentors help them learn what they need to succeed. Many are full-time mothers, employees and students. That's a lot to juggle, especially newly in sobriety. They also are not used to receiving this type of money, so learning skills like budgeting, financial accountability and responsibility is essential."

The program models the traditional Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor-sponsee format, but students can tap into the experience of all the mentors, not

A Reprieve for Women

Who We Serve:

A Woman Who Is:

- Struggling with alcohol and drug addiction
- Needing help to transition back to college or into a career
- That struggles with relationships
- Struggles with healthy body image
- Suffers from trauma
- Is dealing with grief
- That has difficulty with self and peer acceptance
- That lacks direction and goals in the areas of employment, responsibility, and accountability

What We Do:

- 12-Step Immersion Program
- Academic and career readiness
- Life skills program
- Clinical programming begins within 72 hours at local Bradford outpatient office
- 24/7 staffing and mentoring
- Strong family support
- 6-month program with an option to transition to a recovery residence to reinforce and practice newly acquired healthy skills

THE REPRIEVE
An Innovative Recovery Program of Bradford Health Services

For more information:
404.655.8577

BRADFORD HEALTH SERVICES

just one. Other skills the mentors teach are how to handle emotional sobriety, how to manage spiritual needs and career development. "The mentors help them set goals, teach them how to maintain their dreams," Weseman says. "They ask them: What does your unique path look like?"

A goal is to expand throughout the state, using the organization website and social media to drive interest. "The mentorship program is an act of loving kindness from one person to another," DeRicco says. "Those of us in recovery all have friends who are straight and sober and those who didn't make it. It's a shared bond from which we can inspire others, to tell them, 'We know where you are now and we can help.'"

To be a mentor, a woman must be in recovery for at least two years and have achieved an educational degree while in recovery. The mentor and mentee meet in person to review the program guidelines and sign a contract. From there, they speak about two times a week and each month review and update their mentorship plan, which includes educational goals, wellness practices and recovery efforts. The mentors get together as well to share challenges and ideas.

"The mentorship program is especially significant in putting students in recovery on a path to a successful, sober future," Nolan says. "Palm Beach State College is committed to our mission of 'Inspiring Hope, Advancing Skills and Transforming Lives,' so we have a natural synergy with Women Empowering Women. Members of the organization have worked with our Addiction Counseling Services program and have been introduced to our Students in Recovery Club. As the program continues to expand, the students can transition their scholarship into a bachelor's program either at Palm Beach State or at another institution."

A LIFE-CHANGING OPPORTUNITY

To Melissa Torres, a mother of four children ages 15, 13, 8 and 20 months, the most major challenge in getting an education was child care. "I lost custody of my kids when I was in active addiction, and at the time I received the scholarship, I was in the process of getting them back," says Torres, who won the first scholarship in 2016 and is five years in recovery. "The scholarship made continuing my education possible."

Returning to school was as intimidating as it was exciting. She was picking up decades after she dropped out of school in the 11th grade and got her GED. "I never believed in myself until I got sober," she says. "I was serious about my recovery. I went to rehab, then moved to transitional living for a year and became the house manager. I worked the steps with

my sponsor, practiced self-care and went to real estate school. I knew I could study and retain information, but I really didn't know what I wanted to do. My first sponsor had attended Palm Beach State College and pushed me to enroll."

Torres learned about the scholarship opportunity from Women Empowering Women and wrote an essay about herself and her need. "I was so excited to learn that I was the first recipient. I couldn't believe it — or how much money I would receive," she says.

Suddenly, she found herself featured on the news and thrust into a world of supportive, caring women. "It made me feel important and special," she says. "But the most meaningful thing of all was the opportunity to meet Kim's father."

Last year, Torres transferred to Palm Beach Atlantic University, where she is majoring in organizational leadership with a minor in psychology. She will graduate in fall 2020 and expects to earn her master's degree in psychology shortly thereafter.

Torres gets animated when talking about the mentorship program: "My whole recovery process has been one woman after another inspiring me. Now, here I am part of Women Empowering Women. This allows me to become the best version of myself, as well as help others. It's important to remember mentors are mentees. People who think they are only mentors are people who are not open to learning more. A real leader listens, learns, then leads. In the program, women give other women hope, teach them skills and inspire them to persevere. The mentors get to teach me their best qualities, and I get to teach them mine."