

Janine Kramer: Building a House of Hope

Scared. Displaced. Homeless. Lost.

This story is not about refugees on some foreign shore.

These are women right in our own communities.

Women whom Janine Kramer, for one, is going to help.

Lost in the Dark

Janine knows scared.

She once traveled that very road herself. Abused as a child, she moved out at sixteen, pregnant and afraid of her boyfriend. Eventually she married him, hoping to quench his extreme jealousy. But his drinking and abuse only grew worse. Still, she stayed with him for 10 more years, trained by her childhood to believe she deserved nothing better.

However, something had happened to Janine years earlier that began to change that view of herself. At a Christian youth camp, Janine had once heard that God loved her and sent His Son to die to save her. She had put her faith in that love, and come home a new person. The reaction from her family? Ridicule and name-calling. Without anyone in her life to help her grow in her relationship with God, she succumbed quickly to the old negative messages. *You are worthless. You're a bad example for your younger sisters. You don't deserve kindness.*

Little Janine felt abandoned. Her beloved father had moved away when her parents divorced, she had no friends, she hated her life. Then came a brief glimmer of hope: one moment on the sidewalk outside her house, when she was overwhelmed with the sense of God's presence. Janine recalls,

"I remember feeling like God was right there with me, and Him telling me, 'You're different. You're set apart.' I just knew there was going to be something life-changing about what had happened... I just knew life would be okay because I now had Jesus in my heart."

Yet here she found herself, a young woman, facing beatings (and threats of worse) from her husband. A young woman longing to free herself and her two daughters from dark, endless fear. Janine realized she couldn't find freedom by herself. "I didn't really know anything else to do," she says, "but to cry out to God, 'Please help me. I need to get out of here.'" When her chance came, she escaped. The court expedited her divorce and awarded her custody of both her daughters, along with the car and house. But her violent ex-husband destroyed those hopes: he ultimately forced her to leave everything behind but one of her daughters.

Janine was now homeless. Directionless. Identity-less. She finally landed at a shelter. There, a wise and caring mentor began to help her turn her life around.

Repairing a Shattered Life

Janine credits her mentor with helping her re-connect with her budding faith. Though the woman could not legally share her own Christian faith with clients of the shelter as part of her job, she found ways to

do so on her own time. For Janine, that was the key to her healing. In everything, down to the details of making a “safety plan,” Janine could see God at work. She started attending church, and enjoyed praying with her advocate whenever they could arrange it.

Next Janine’s sense of herself started to emerge. At first, she says, “I didn’t even know who I was. When I left my abusive situation, I had no idea what I was interested in. I had been so controlled for so long, I had no idea what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.” Survival by “walking on eggshells” had never taught her how to plan meals, how to design fun days for her girls, or how to manage money. Now Janine discovered she enjoyed applying makeup and styling hair, so she studied cosmetology. That landed her a job with J C Penney’s cosmetics department.

Soon she discovered she had even more to offer.

Janine’s experiences had provided her with an unusual skill set: insight into the long, complex journey toward healing. In addition to her own recovery, she had participated in her father’s. His Alcoholics Anonymous meetings served as their family outings during her childhood. Listening to the testimonials and speeches, hanging out with the other kids in smoky rooms while adults played cards, and reciting the Serenity Prayer until it became a sort of bedtime ritual—all those hours had shaped her. She grew to admire her father’s relational skills. His later work as a trained alcohol and chemical dependency counselor—a friend and advocate for others—inspired her.

This hard-won knowledge gained her a job at the domestic violence shelter called Shelter House in Willmar, MN, now known as Safe Avenues. During her 16 years with them, she served as an overnight advocate, an outreach advocate (referring women in from other communities), and also as a legal advocate who accompanied women to court dates. Later she served as director at Grace Place in Willmar, a faith-based transition house for women.

Then, abruptly, her work ended. Janine confesses she felt angry with God over that. On her daily four-mile walks, she begged Him to tell her what she was supposed to do with the rest of her life.

Meanwhile, she didn’t sit around. She participated in the jail ministry of nearby Grace Community Church, where she sang during worship services and then visited with the female inmates. Listening to their stories, awareness washed over Janine. Here were women—women in her own backyard—who had nowhere to go after their release. No support network to steady them while they learned to change their lives’ direction. No one like the mentor who helped turn Janine’s own life around.

That’s when she knew. She needed to build that place. Create that network. Provide those mentors.

Praying for a team of people to catch the same vision, Janine soon found herself surrounded by gifted leaders. Together, they have all the skills needed to develop and implement the plans she has in mind. Together, they are building Olivia’s House of Hope.

Olivia’s House of Hope – Transition to a New Life

Building on Janine’s lessons learned and research done, Olivia’s House of Hope is being “created for women overcoming difficult life conditions such as incarceration, alcohol/chemical dependency, homelessness, and divorce, looking to grow a spiritual foundation of right living for generations to come.” It will not be a “safe house” for women needing protection, but a transitional house preparing women to re-enter society on a healthier footing.

The faith-based program is designed with several key strengths:

- Opportunities to grow in relationship to God through Bible studies, positive relationships, available time and space for prayer, and practicing the principles God established for His people's good
- A maximum of 6 women residents served by staff, one-on-one mentors, and other volunteers
- Following a probationary two weeks, a minimum of six months' commitment to the program, up to eighteen months
- Addiction recovery help through Celebrate Freedom in Willmar and Alcoholics/Narcotics Anonymous
- Multiple funding sources, including Group Residential Housing assistance for eligible residents
- Training and support in skills such as independent living, finances, volunteering and employment, education, and developing healthy boundaries and relationships
- Network-building in the local community

Knowing that recognizing God's great love for her will be essential to any woman's full recovery, Janine is excited that, as a faith-based organization, Olivia's House of Hope will erect no barriers to providing women with all they need to recover emotionally, spiritually, physically, and socially.

Once scared, displaced, homeless, and lost, women who pass through Olivia's House of Hope can emerge new. Janine looks forward to seeing women leave old habits behind, form positive and lasting relationships in their community, find churches they can attend, and go on to forge a new and exciting life with God's help.

Just like Janine did.