

# Loretta Abell: From near-death to salvation

By Ron MacArthur

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To look at Loretta Abell today, there are no signs that just one year ago she was a homeless heroin addict headed down a one-way path to destruction.

Within a few months' time, she had overdosed three times while staying at Crisis House – and she hadn't reached bottom yet.

In one 24-hour period, she overdosed, broke her



As a daily reminder of her struggle, Loretta Abell wears a blue wristband she received from an addiction rehabilitation program.

## Abell

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foot, lost her car, home and custody of her young son. That was a year ago, and it was her rock-bottom point, she says.

The staff at Crisis House, a homeless shelter in Georgetown, are surprised she survived. "I found her crossing the highway one day, and she had no idea what she was doing or where she was," said Crisis House Program Director Nancy Woodruff.

Another time, alert Crisis House staff were able to wake her up, call 911 and get her to the hospital. "She would have died in that bed," Woodruff said.

Crisis House staff call her transformation miraculous. "I saw a bright heart in her even though she thought she was worthless," Woodruff said.

Now 36, Abell started taking drugs as a teenager growing up in Baltimore. Her lifestyle created problems at home, and in 2004 she ended up in prison for 18 months.

She was released to her parents and placed on two years' probation. That's when her family moved to Sussex County. It didn't take long before she turned to drugs, and she was forced to leave her home.

"An addict is a person with nothing to lose. An addict is a dangerous person who really doesn't care if they live or die.

It's a horrible, vicious cycle," Abell said.

She said being an addict was a full-time job. She struggled to get money to support her habit. She carried vials of clean urine in her pocketbook – along with needles and bags of heroin – so she could pass drug tests. "That's how crazy it was. I kept asking what was wrong with me?" she said.

She's had several jobs over the years and obtained her aesthetician's license, but just about every dollar she made went to buy drugs. She was clean for more than two years from 2009 to 2012, and she thought she had turned her life around. Not so. "I threw it all away," she says.

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Little did she know the next three years would be the worst of her life. She ended up living on the street and in abandoned buildings, but the support of Crisis Center staff never wavered. Even though she was evicted from the shelter for drug use, Woodruff said she never gave up on Abell. "I saw a good heart, and I kept pushing her in a positive way," Woodruff said.

She is thankful for the support she received at Crisis House. "It's amazing. God works inside these walls," she said.

Without Crisis House, she's

convinced she would have been another in a long line of heroin victims.

"The heroin epidemic is insane. I can't believe I survived it," Abell said.

During her third stay at Crisis House, she decided to take action. She entered detox, started going to Narcotics Anonymous meetings and got enrolled in the Attack Addiction rehabilitation program for women in New Castle County.

"Through it all, Nancy showed me unconditional love and support," she said. "I couldn't have done it without her."

Abell said she needs routine, structure and a strong support system. "You still have to do the work to remain clean, but you also need to surround yourself with positive people. You can't do it alone," she said.

Today, Abell has her smile back. She is involved in her son's life again, and she opened a bank account in December. "The good news is that I've got it all back and even more," she said.

She wants to help others "heal, feel and deal" she says. "I need to share my story because I never want to go back, and you can't sweep it under the rug," she said.

In October, she started her own business in Lewes, and Feb. 18 marks her one-year anniversary of being clean.

"I believe that God gives the toughest battles to his strongest soldiers. With faith, I'm going to make it," she says.