

Martha's House seeks haven for women out of jail

By **Tim Callahan**

COASTAL OBSERVER

This time of year, the story of the babe born in a manger because there was no room at the inn is told around the world.

But, what if there was no inn? No manger? No place to stay for the night, except to return home. But, Mary and Joseph could not do that. Not with Mary in her condition.

Two thousand years later, there are many women in Mary's straits. Women in bad shape who should not go home. But these women are penniless, with nothing but the clothes on their backs, and with no choice but to accept the free ride home. Home to hell. Home where poverty, drugs and crime are a way of life.

These are some of the women released from the Georgetown County Detention Center. Often former drug addicts and alcoholics who were sexually abused growing up, they find themselves right back where the addictive cycle started, according to Susan Tyler, one of the founders of Martha's House, a Christian halfway house for women released from jail.

The temptations are often too hard to resist, Tyler says. The women don't stay home long. They end up back in jail. "Parents, or siblings, or neigh-

bors down the street, tempt them to get back into the old lifestyle," Tyler said. "The women are without a job or money, and it's just too easy to get back into old habits. That is why the recidivism rate is so high."

Tyler knows. The owner of Ruby's Beauty Shop in Pawleys Island was never in jail for a crime, but it is "only by the grace of God," she said. "I was a drunk. I certainly did enough things to get me in jail."

However, Tyler has been in jail a lot, working in prison ministry for her church, Georgetown Community Church, for three years. And that is what makes Tyler ideal for a new area ministry. She can relate to prisoners and they can relate to her.

"I wondered why women who gave their lives to Christ in prison had such a hard time when they got out," she said.

So she asked them. And they told her that after being incarcerated for so long they became very afraid to re-enter society. Fears and doubts haunt them. How can I get a job? Where will I live? How can I stay straight?

In jail, their decisions were made for them. Once out, they are bombarded with choices, many of them bad because they are right back in the same environment they left. The environment that helped put them in jail



Deborah Stillman/Coastal Observer

Susan Tyler is one of the founders of Martha's House. in the first place.

"If it's in your face long enough, you will succumb," Tyler said.

But, what if the women had a place to live in the county with other women trying to learn a new way of life? A place with mentors who could assist with every thing from staying off drugs to applying for a job. A place that could take care of their basic needs — food, clothing, medicine • and spiritual needs, while they learned to reintegrate into society.

A place like Martha's House, which is only a vision for its

founders at this point, but it is slowly taking real shape.

"Six months ago we didn't have money to buy a book of stamps," Tyler said. "Now we are a 501-c-(3) non-profit organization and we are getting support from several churches and individuals," Tyler said. "This is through Christ - not religion. It doesn't matter what denomination someone is. These people just want to help."

And Tyler wants to build Martha's House to help ex-prisoners grow in Christ. "Many of the women feel they have no value, no worth," Tyler said. "They try to kill the pain of abuse somehow - drugs, alcohol or cigarettes. We want them to know they are children of God. He values everyone. Everyone has worth to God. He made them."

And, God has a plan for them, Tyler said. Maybe they will comfort others as they have been comforted.

Tyler's own life spiraled out of control, she said, and she saw no plan, no purpose.

"I was miserable," she said. "My whole life was falling apart. It was then that I asked the Lord to come into my life. And I

believe I understood why I went through everything I went through. It was to get me in a position to help."

That was four years ago, and Tyler knows God has a plan for her. She believes it is helping start Martha's House.

She has help from Martha's House board members Jimmy Britt and Dixie Tindall of Georgetown and Keith Kramer and Mary Frances Fraser of Pawleys Island. They meet the first Thursday of the month at 5 p.m. at Eggs Up Grill for the regular board meeting. The meeting is open to the public at 6:30 p.m. and ideas and volunteers are welcome. In fact, it was at one of these meetings that Bill Oberst Jr. attended and offered his services free of charge for a Christmas fund-raiser, Tyler said.

The benefit performance of Oberst's one-man version of "A Christmas Carol" is Friday at 7 p.m. at All Saints' Church.

The needs are great, Tyler said, but she is hoping God will touch hearts to donate land, a building, a vehicle, furniture, office supplies, time, prayer, and money. And, of course, volunteer time is needed to mentor, counsel, and teach Bible, computers, home-making and GED courses. If you want to help, call Susan Tyler at 237-4222.