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# Paper Suit Off, Apron On

*Angela House sets residents up for success*

WORDS BY FRANCINE SPIERING • PHOTOS BY JENN DUNCAN

A series of photo portraits decorates a wall in the common room. Women's faces, each accompanied by a word: Freedom. Forgiven. Determined. There are little notes with each portrait. "If I were able to live this word on a daily basis my life would be so different [...] I have been living this word since I arrived at Angela House," wrote Sharencia under her portrait, Empowerment.

The women in the portraits are all residents of Angela House, a 16-bed residential facility to help women rehabilitate after incarceration. Art classes (including photography and writing) are part of an all-round program to provide them with the tools to figure out their place in society.

Those who come to Angela House applied for residency while still incarcerated. They are typically economically disadvantaged, (at risk of being) homeless and in need of support on many levels, from health care to employment preparedness.

They've done their time and are free to go—but they have nothing and no place to go.

"Some don't even have the clothes on their backs," says Sister Maureen O'Connell, founder and head of Angela House. "They are turned out on the streets in this." She holds up a light-blue jumpsuit made of paper. "Everyone knows that someone in one of those paper suits has nowhere to go, nobody to turn to for help. They are at their most vulnerable. It sets them up for failure."

One of the first things new arrivals at Angela House do is go upstairs to the "boutique," a room that has racks full of garments and shoes in different styles and sizes. They get to select four outfits right away.

Angela House was founded in 2001 as a place to offer destitute women released from prison safe shelter, food, guidance and the tools they need to turn their lives around.

Angela House became an independent nonprofit within the Archdiocese of Galveston/Houston in 2006 and moved to its current location on Reed Street, south of Downtown Houston in 2013. Since welcoming the first resident in 2002, 346 women passed through

Angela House. "We have a success rate that remains close to 76% and for the women who stay with us at least 60 days, it is even 81%," says Sister Maureen, referring to the women who made it on their own after they left Angela House.

To help set them up for success, part of life in Angela House is a weekly program of activities—ranging from meditation to writing to money management—aimed to offer therapeutic as well as educational and rehabilitative tools.

"Most of them have a huge gap on their resume," says Dr. Andrea Link. She is the program director of Healthy & Whole, a comprehensive program that includes wellness classes (focusing on nutrition, eating healthy on a budget and the importance of sleep, exercise and self-care), hands-on cooking classes and group exercise classes.

Cooking from scratch and using fresh ingredients is part of it, too. Each week Angela House receives three farm shares from Plant It Forward, underwritten by a generous donor. As a recipient from the Houston Food Bank, 3-4 times per month they receive a delivery that typically include fruit juice, eggs, dairy and meat and occasionally fresh vegetables.

"It's a community and in many ways a sisterhood," says Link, who has been involved with Angela House since January 2013, when she started Healthy & Whole at the facility.

"The feedback we got from our cooking instructors working with our residents was that they really could cook," says Link. "That's when we started to think about a program that would bring them into restaurant kitchens for an internship to learn the ropes, gain confidence and have something to put on their resume."

The outcome is Let It Rise, a vocational training program aimed at the culinary industry. "These internships are also going to show the women what a functional workplace looks like, something most have never been a part of."

Let It Rise is a two-part program. The first part is a speaker series called Tea & Conversation, where food industry professionals come to Angela House to talk about lessons they have learned and to provide



insights into their field. Pat Greer (Pat Greer’s Kitchen) and Larry Forehand (Casa Olé) were among the first speakers. The second part is an internship at a local restaurant kitchen.

Tracy was the first Angela House resident to qualify for an internship: She finished the required minimum 90 days of Healthy & Whole, graduated from a rigorous job readiness program and got her Texas Food Handler’s Certificate.

The pilot internship was at Pondicheri in November 2016. “We talked [with Angela House] about how we could contribute and help some of the women in their program to gain experience in the culinary industry, in a different kind of environment than a fast-food chain. We set up an internship for two weeks,” says Mary Cuclis, head chef and general manager at Pondicheri.

“I’d never seen that kind of kitchen,” says Tracy. “They made everything in that kitchen. They had spices in bulk that they toasted and ground. They made all the dough right there. [In that kitchen] everything was made fresh.” Tracy worked on pastry one week, and on savory the second week. She learned to chop, prep vegetables, work dough and overall acquired a new appreciation for food made fresh.

One of the best things Tracy walked away with was better knife skills. “It was hard at first,” she says. “But now I got it. I got the motion!” she says, and her arm moves in a circular rhythm, hand pretending the handle of a chef’s knife.

“Tracy did a bunch of different things here,” says Cuclis. “She was definitely quiet and timid in the beginning but towards the end, she really seemed to be enjoying herself and learning a lot.”

“She was able to work without much monitoring by the end of

those two weeks. We couldn’t have had a better experience with her as well: She showed up on time and was very professional.”

At the end of January, Tracy was still looking for a job. Says Dr. Link, “It has been hard to watch Tracy struggle to find employment. But since the internship, her confidence and belief in her abilities has really increased. Maybe most importantly, I think this internship has made her see that there are people who are willing to see her for who she is now, not who she used to be.”

Tiny Boxwoods and A Fare Extraordinaire offer the next internships, and Link is in the process of matching interns.

“I just knew the Houston restaurant community would embrace this idea. Programs like ours are taking off all over the United States, but we haven’t had anything like this in Houston. When you bring together restaurants that want to give back to their communities, and women who just want a chance to turn their lives around, really wonderful things can happen.” 

> Interested to learn more, including about volunteering or contributing, visit [angelahouse.org](http://angelahouse.org), or email [info@angelahouse.org](mailto:info@angelahouse.org)

Intro: Tracy in the Angela House kitchen.  
Left to right: Dr. Andrea Link, Tracy and Sister Maureen O’Connell.  
(right) portraits on the wall tell a story.

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