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"GET IN LINE"

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WIT: an alternative to hopelessness

By DONNA M. BEEGLE

I dropped out of the ninth grade to get married. At 15, I could not understand what value education would have for me in my role as a mother and a wife. Everyone I knew went to work or got married after graduating from the eighth grade.

In Phoenix, Ariz., it was legal to quit school after the eighth grade. In the poverty-stricken neighborhood I grew up in, where teen-agers roamed the trash-lined streets all hours of the night, it was also the norm. I grew up with the idea that women were supposed to get married and their husbands would take care of them, sort of.

Nine years and two kids later, my marriage was over. I was living in Oregon without any employable skills. The best I could hope for was a minimum-wage, fast-food restaurant job.

It wasn't long before I had to deal with eviction from my home, shut-off notices from the utility companies and no money to live on. I didn't know where to turn. My parents couldn't help; they, too, were living in poverty. My ex-husband had disappeared, so there was no child support.

I went to an agency for help, and the workers rented us a room in a roach-infested motel on Sandy Boulevard and referred me to a new program called Women in Transition to help women in my situation.

I took a bus to Mt. Hood Community College Maywood Center. The Women in Transition director, Judy Giblin, said I was just what they were looking for, a woman who wanted to change her life.

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IN MY OPINION

The WIT program, which began in January 1985, is funded by a federal Carl Perkins grant and the Private Industry Council. Since then, the program has expanded its staff and moved to a larger building to meet the growing demands for help with training, retraining, skill-building and assistance toward obtaining education degrees or certificates. I was in the first group of women served by WIT.

I entered the program's three-week life skills seminar without much hope. The seminar's focus was to give women support and information to overcome barriers and become financially independent. Each day we worked on confidence-building, career planning and job-search techniques.

My self-confidence went up after I took placement tests that indicated I was smart and capable. I gained a sense of direction. Dreams were becoming realities.

I told the staff members that I would like to be a news anchor, but that was something only other people — the best and the brightest — could achieve. Within two months, I had completed my GED and enrolled in Mt. Hood Community College's journalism program. My first article was published soon after.

One year later, I was asked to be the public relations director for the college paper, the Advocate. Each step gave me confidence and courage to continue. In June 1988, I walked across the stage in my bright red cap and gown to receive my associate's degree. I don't know who was more proud: me, my parents or the WIT staff members.

Life wasn't all roses. I had problems with my \$200 car breaking down, no gas money to

get to school and other financial problems. I had been receiving \$408 a month from Adult and Family Services; because I had chosen to go to school, the agency reduced my monthly income to \$238.

Again WIT came to my rescue, providing emotional support and help with child-care, transportation and housing expenses. Each time a barrier was placed in my way, WIT was there to help me overcome it or connect me with another agency that could.

I am now a senior at the University of Portland in the communications department. I have received academic honors every semester. I even got the opportunity to study journalism in England last summer.

I have grown and changed. My shoulders are no longer slumped. My family's future looks bright. My children talk of going to college. I am the first in my family to do so; now I won't be the last.

In May, I will graduate with my bachelor's degree. I share my degree with the WIT program.

Thousands of women in our society have no one to turn to for guidance. In the Portland metro area there are only two other programs like WIT.

Women in Transition has served more than 500 women in the Portland metro area, and 82 percent of them have been placed into jobs or job-training programs. In 1989, the group operated on a \$137,577 budget, which has been reduced every year since 1985. The funds are expected to run out in 1992 with no new financial support in sight.

We need more programs to reach out and put an end to the rising poverty of single mothers. We don't want handouts, we only want a hand up to guide us into high-quality jobs that pay enough to support our families; jobs that allow us to hold our heads high, look life in the eye and smile.