

[Providing help for the addicted and the lost](#)

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Libbie Combee, founder of Leland Family Ministries, spent many an hour in Polk County's juvenile detention center, visiting her son, who started using drugs just as she began her recovery.

"I was actually the one who turned him in," she said. "He was 14 then, and I was trying to get help for him and for me."

It soon became clear that help was scarce, and hard to access. Combee grew frustrated when time after time, juvenile justice authorities put Jason back on probation, rather than putting him in a residential program, "because he didn't have enough points." Juvenile justice penalties are tied to a point system.

Eventually, Jason was locked up, but the outlook for treatment didn't improve. In talking with other families visiting their detained children, a common theme emerged.

"There were no services for people. I asked, do we just want to put a Band-Aid on things? These people's lives are devastated and they have no place to turn."

Combee got permission to run a treatment group for the youthful offenders.

As time went on, she noticed the same shortage of help in the adult population. Furthermore, there was no help or support for the families of the addicted and incarcerated.

"I was amazed by that," she said.

People who have been in jail, especially for drug-related charges, face formidable obstacles in attempting to recover some semblance of normal life. It's just as difficult for their loved ones, who don't know where to turn, Combee noted.

"My phone rings all the time with family members calling," she said.

Combee, with support from Bartow businessman Dave Hallock, went to work, determined to change the status quo. The two had become friends while volunteering at the Women's Care Center in Bartow, and Hallock, who had a broad network of civic and governmental connections, believed in her cause.

Little by little, a much-needed ministry came from Combee's decision that "Somebody needs to do something." "When I first started this, no one had faith in me," she said. "I was devastated."

"It takes a long time to become a woman of God," Combee said, "but I decided to put things in his hands."

It appears that God is on her side, because the ministry has become an integral part of the recovery community.

From the Juvenile detention groups, the program has grown to encompass a four-week adult jail recovery program and legislation supporting Leland's probation-mandated Meth-Free seminars. The ministry has programs in Polk, Pasco, Columbia and Hillsborough counties. The Polk resource centers are in Bartow and Lakeland.

There are 12-step groups through "Recovery for Life," open to the addicted as well as their families, with home-cooked meals before the noon groups. The harvest of their community garden as well as partnerships with food banks, send food boxes home weekly with group members.

A link with dietary interns from Keiser University spawned the HEAL program, which stands for "Healthy Eating for Active Lifestyles. " A gym and weight room is also in the works, with the goal of reversing the toll that drug use takes on the human body. They also host a quit-smoking program, funded by the Florida Department of Health at no cost to participants.

Probationers can do community service through Leland, and some of the ministry's members and volunteers have formed a "Handyman Outreach" providing repairs and lawn services for those in need.

The most recent addition is Harvest House, housing and mentoring male Leland members who have committed to full-time ministry. The men also participate as volunteers in Leland's other programs.

Combee's bond with Dennis Ross, who had become a Florida legislator, opened some doors, and she was asked to sit on some key committees. She served on the board of a statewide methamphetamine task force, as well as serving on Gov. Jeb Bush's Faith-Based Community Initiative Board and the Department of Juvenile Justice's statewide Faith-Based Board.

Combee spoke with the authority of someone who has "been there," and movers and shakers were listening.

She takes no credit, though, and says all the credit goes to God.

"This has been a venture of faith from the very beginning," Combee says.

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