'You can only go forward'

An ex-beauty queen talks about her return from hell

By RUTH FOOTE
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BAFAYETTE — Teen-ager Diana Donnell was beautiful, smart and fun to be around.

She became the first black everything at predominantly white University of Southwestern Louisiana.

In 1972, she won the Miss Black Louisiana Pageant. Her future seemed bright.

But in just a few years, the pretty country girl from Jennings was spinning out of control. First, there were the bad marriages. Then the spousal abuse, followed by illegal drug use and state authorities taking her children from her.

Then she sank even lower. Donnell became a $20-a-rock crack cocaine prostitute.

This story is about Diana Donnell's return from hell.

"Many times, I sit down and retrace my steps, but I can't regret what I've done," Donnell said. "Regret only brings about feelings of remorse. You can't change things; you can only go forward."

"I've never felt that God wants us to make the bad choices we make, but if there's something that is a part of destiny, he'll take that negative thing, and turn it around," she said.

Drug-free for the past three years, the 44-year-old Donnell has her children back, and plans to get married again. She is a seamstress at LaBelle Femme in Jennings.

She is not embarrassed to stand before audiences, whether they are church groups or university students, and share her past that includes forging checks and selling her body to buy drugs.

"Many people think (drug) users don't want to live better, but that's not true," she said. "They do want 'better' for themselves; they just don't know where to find 'the better,' or how to even get back from where they are."

"It's almost like you're taking a journey and you find yourself totally lost," she adds, "and you don't remember where you made the wrong turn, and there are no landmarks to show you how to get back on track. You're totally lost; you need someone to point you back in the right direction, someone who really feels something from the heart."

For Donnell, that someone was a former high school classmate, who reminded her of her past.

TOP: Diana Donnell was part of the 1972 Homecoming Court at USL.
BOTTOM: Donnell was the first black cheerleader at USL in 1972.

Diana Donnell fell into hard times after some college successes, but has recovered and is a seamstress and fashion designer at LaBelle Femme Dress Shop in Jennings.

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ed of her how she used to sing and dance around the room. A recovering alcoholic, he also reminded her of how dangerous it was on the streets.

At the time, she admits, "I had gone past the state of fearing. I had gone so low, it was almost like I had a death wish. I had come to a point where I thought that I no longer had anything to lose."

Donnell's descent into hell began after some successful firsts for her. She was the first black cheerleader and dance sweetheart at a nearby white high school, Miss Black Louisiana in 1972. A year later, she was an unwed mother.

She was 21 years old when her son, her firstborn, was born. Even at that time, she enjoyed bringing him to her class. She and the father got married and the family moved to Baton Rouge.

Tragically, she landed a job with the state bureau of alcoholism and drug abuse. She also went to Southern University, where she enjoyed singing at talent shows.

The marriage collapsed. Donnell decided she wanted to try a singing career in California. She left her son with her mother and went out west in 1975.

Her career never got started. After months of unsuccessful auditions, she returned home in 1979.

Donnell found herself returning home. She started dating and soon the first of her three daughters was born. The children's father started pushing cocaine on her. Donnell admits, she experimented with marijuana and cocaine in college.

"Weed was cool; it was accepted," she recalls. "We were the weed generation - make love, not war."

But after Donnell married the father of her daughters in 1981, it wasn't long before she became a disillusioned housewife. At the time, she remembers seeing former college classmates.

"They were all dressed and making their way to the right place, and here I was in an old house, with a bunch of kids running around," she said.

It reminded her of her success when she wondered what could she do to top her state crown.

"You almost felt like you were in college when you were younger. And you felt, 'I'm alive, you can live with anybody.'"

The problem was Donnell couldn't live with the man. She tried to stop dealing, cocaine made it easier for her to cope, especially with the fact that she had a drug addict, a drunk addict and a womanizing father. She was rushed home, and when he was, he was abusive, she said.

"I began to concentrate more on the drug usage. My habit became more important. I didn't have to work harder and hustle to support it, it continued to make the worst of utopia," she said.

So she started lacing weed with cocaine.

"It made it a higher high," she said. "When you do cocaine, the cocaine made you zoom. Weed sort of extends the life of the cocaine."

Donnell laughingly remembers the time when weed nearly disappeared from the streets.

Donnell recalls: "Someone said, 'I know where some other stuff is.' And we went and got it. We used to go out and just try anything. That's when I met rock cocaine - currently known as crack.

By 1989, crack was pushing Donnell toward a downward spiral. In three years I had lost everything," she remembers. "A lot of it relating to my heart. I was taken away materialistically because I was already gone."

State officials took her three daughters in 1992 when someone called and reported she had abandoned them. By this time, her son was in the Navy.

The children were placed back and forth for three years with family members and foster care. At one time, her handicapped daughter was institutionalized.

There were three Christmases she spent without her children. She finally decided to clean herself up by kicking her drug problem and going to parenting classes. She also started attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings.

"Then, with the help of her mother, she was able to get her children back."

"I tell them I can't change what happened; I can only try to live better in the future," she said. "I apologize for the missing years. I can't make it up to them or erase the pain they went through, but I tell them they should know that the same time they were hurting, I was hurting more because I had to carry the responsibility of knowing that I had done this."

Nor can she erase the days she sold her body to strangers.

"It wasn't a decision; it just happened," she said of prostitution. "I wanted something, I didn't have money, and somebody says, 'Do this for me,' and you don't think about it. And you didn't want to think about it."

Yet, during this time, Donnell says that her mother never turned her back on her.

"No matter what I did or became, she was always there - praying, hoping, fasting," she recalls. "Yet I hurt her, but you can't stop smoking because of the pain you're causing your family. The desire to smoke is greater than the ability to hear with your heart what they're going through. You don't want to hear what they're going through.

Donnell said most addicts convince themselves that they're hurting no one but themselves.

"And that's okay because you feel you deserve to be hurt, because you feel you're punishing yourself, and you know they'll cry for me at my funeral, which is a foolish thought because you're dead already. But that's what the addicts do to you."

That didn't mean that Donnell didn't help, either.

"Even when I was out there, I was constantly praying, asking God to show me what I was doing," she said. "I prayed and asked God to take the desire away; that's what I had to pray for."

When she made up her mind to quit, her prayers were answered.

"Some people would say it was a spiritual awakening, and I suppose it was," she said. "When you attend AA (Alcoholics Anonymous), you look to a higher power. You need a spiritual source to turn to. But like a minister once said, 'Why look to the stars for answers? Why not look to who made the stars?'"

Unfortunately, Donnell said, many addicts look to drugs for their spiritual peace, their spiritual commitment.

"They turn to the drug that gives them a feeling of heaven, so they feel it must be right," she said. "By the time you realize you are hooked, you've been hooked. The spirit has taken over their body, mind and soul. It has become their god, and they do what it takes to get this feeling again, and they do what it takes to worship their god, and that's what it's really all about.

Rehabilitation didn't work initially for Donnell.

"It wasn't in my heart. I wanted to get high. The first thing an addict must realize is: I like to smoke; I like the high. That's the positive," she said. "But you have to also deal with the negative: I don't like what I feel like when I'm not high. I can't stand to look in the mirror and see a person who looks like a zombie, a skeleton, anything but alive. I don't like that. I can't go back before my family or children and face them without embarrassment.

"That's the only way to conquer the crack demon."

And other demons as well.

"I know this much. If I had not gone through the things I've gone through, she said, "I wouldn't be sitting here with a burden in my heart to help those out there, or a burden in my heart to educate those out there who don't have any idea of what's going on out there."

"By being an educated, worldly person now puts me in that precarious situation to touch both sides," she said. "I'm like the middle man - that person, that likes to join the two sides so that somewhere in there, somebody can be saved."