

Angelic Assistance

JOY LEIKER

Staff

By JOY LEIKER - jleiker@muncie.gannett.com

MUNCIE -- A single mother, Angelic Wood was at the end of her ropes. She was sick, out of work and had no money to pay her bills. She had running water, but no electricity, gas or phone. Her car was repossessed and her home in foreclosure. Could it get any worse?

It was time to swallow her pride. Time to admit she needed help. She, and her two boys, couldn't live like this anymore. So she wrote a letter.

"I just had no clue what else to do," she said.

She begged for help and sent her letter to state and federal lawmakers, the mayor, governor and even the president. Wood got only three replies -- from Mayor Sharon McShurley's office, state Rep. Dennis Tyler and U.S. Rep. Mike Pence. At least someone cared, she thought, even though she was disappointed in so few responses. But the mayor's office put Wood in touch with Teamwork for Quality Living, an agency she admits she had never heard of before, but now credits with helping her restart her life.

'I always had a job'

Wood, 36, was diagnosed with fibromyalgia in 2002. It's a disease that many dismiss because its symptoms can sound so minor -- headaches, back spasms, forgetfulness.

"I take 14 pills at night for pain and to sleep," she said.

But her illness leaves her exhausted, and though her former employer denies it, she believes it was the cause of her getting fired in August 2007. She was out of work for more than a year. And though she did receive some child support from her boys' fathers, it wasn't enough to maintain her home on West Fifth Street.

Eventually, all of her utilities were turned off except for the water to flush the toilet. Without electricity and gas, there was no warm water for a shower. But there was also no way to keep food fresh in the refrigerator. She qualified for food stamps, but at one point didn't get them for two months.

Enter Teamwork for Quality Living. Eliminating poverty is just one element of its larger mission -- to build a stronger and better community. And with Wood, the agency's work began with an invitation to dinner.

She said she had no idea how dinner was going to solve any of her problems. She didn't go the first time she was invited, but accepted a second invitation.

Dinner wasn't a pity party, but also wasn't just a soup kitchen for people in need. Wood was surrounded by people in the middle and upper classes, and she said they seemed interested in her story. They

wanted to help, but more importantly, Wood quickly learned that Teamwork wanted to help her help herself.

She enrolled in a 16-week, stipend-paid "Getting Ahead" course. There are lessons about money and businesses that prey on the poor, but also about "the barriers that are holding people in poverty," said Carrie Summers, a case manager at Teamwork.

Wood admits she had never thought about such things. She hadn't noticed that rent-to-own shops and check-cashing businesses set up shop in or near poor neighborhoods. She hadn't realized that she suddenly was isolated, surrounded only by others who were poor and struggling like she was.

"I was always raised middle class. I always had a job," Wood said. 'It's mindboggling'.

Now a graduate of that 16-week course, Wood is on the road to improvement. In October she got a part-time job with the National Telecommuting Institute, a Boston agency that helps people find work-from-home jobs. She answers telephone calls from people who want to order Internal Revenue Service tax forms.

Teamwork also helped Wood connect with other agencies and services that could help her. She has purchased a car, with help from Christian Ministries. She is keeping her house, and getting current on her payments. She's registered for utility assistance programs through the winter so no matter what her heat can't be turned off in the cold.

Her job requires a telephone, Internet connection and computer, and she has all three. She has qualified for Medicaid, and through her job earns money paid into an account for additional medical expenses.

Tyler, the state representative, said he hears from people like Wood more and more. Two years ago he maybe received one call for aid every two weeks. Now, there's at least one every day. Sometimes more.

"It's mindboggling," Tyler said of the need for help. 'Walk a mile in my shoes'.

But for now, Wood is a success story. She's working. And she's excited to celebrate Christmas today with her two sons. At the same time, she's open about her struggles. She knows some might dismiss her as just another single mom, an uneducated drain on the system. What would she say to those people?

"I would say they need to walk a mile in my shoes."

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