



## Former Inmates Successfully Transition into Society – Blair Simmons

"Leaving the Cocoon" is a non-profit organization of mentors who help women make a difficult transition easier. The program has not only helped these women get back on their feet, but they say it's changed their lives.

If you had told Paula Etheridge a couple years ago that she'd be in Brentwood at a dinner in her honor... she never would have believed you.

"Actually I lived on the streets of Dickerson road for 9 years," says Etheridge.

She was addicted to drugs and was in and out of jail. But living that type of life proved to be a whole lot easier than getting out of it.

It was actually in jail that her life changed... where she met Vicki Harvey.

"The amazing thing to me was there was this woman who seemed to love me," says Etheridge.

Vicki Harvey spends her time investing in women that society deems unlovable.

"These women are what most of us would consider rejects to society. A lot of people say why bother? The reason why bother? Number one is they're a person and deserve a 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th chance -- and number two, realize it cost taxpayers \$25,000 a year to keep one person incarcerated," says Harvey.

Etheridge says it's thanks to the Cocoon Program and women who loved her when she felt unlovable, she's been clean for nearly seven years now. She's in school to become a social worker, and she's giving back.

"When I got out of prison I opened a recovery house for women and decided it was through a relationship I wanted to give back to the community and help other women who were in my condition," she says.

Harvey says when someone is released they usually have no money, no job, and nobody that really expects them to become anything. Her mission with "Leaving the Cocoon" is to fix that and make a lasting mark on women's lives.

"Everyone has nicknamed her 'Momma Vicki' because she stepped up to be a mother when other people couldn't be," says Etheridge.

As for Etheridge, she'll be back in prison soon... but this time as a mentor.

"Going from one side to the other is amazing in itself."

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