

The Answer to America's Addiction Crisis Could Come Out of Tulsa

Nicholas Kristof on the most effective recovery program he's ever seen.

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Nicholas Kristof

I'm Nicholas Kristof. I'm a columnist at "The New York Times." And I've got a rare story that is actually uplifting. It's a story about how one place is overcoming America's curse of addiction.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

I think that we in the US have bungled our response to addiction. And that's partly because people have just abandoned hope that anything will actually make a difference. And I think that's wrong. So, let me tell you about Women in Recovery, which is a program in Oklahoma that treats addiction. And it has generated a remarkable track record.

Women in Recovery is a diversion program for women in Tulsa. The program says that it is cheaper than incarceration, which is the alternative for the women involved. And people in Oklahoma say that it saves the state millions of dollars for that reason. It typically lasts about 18 months. About 70 percent of women who start Women in Recovery

manage to complete it. And of those who do complete it, fewer than 4 percent ever return to prison within three years of graduation.

I went to Tulsa recently to learn more about Women in Recovery, and I spent time with one of the women in the program, a 27-year-old named Katelyn Fulbright.

Katelyn Fulbright

K-A-T-E-L-Y-N.

Nicholas Kristof

K-A-T-E?

Katelyn Fulbright

Uh-huh.

Nicholas Kristof

Katelyn began to use drugs at the age of 16, when her boyfriend introduced her to meth and cocaine. Katelyn then began to sell drugs to finance her habit.

Katelyn Fulbright

It started off with small amounts and just dating bad boys. That's definitely a fault of mine.

Nicholas Kristof

She ended up marrying a guy who was also in the drug world. And then she ended up being arrested with a large quantity of drugs. And really, out of desperation, then, she entered Women in Recovery.

Katelyn Fulbright

I was like, I don't want to go to prison, so let's try this.

Nicholas Kristof

How long would you have faced in prison?

Katelyn Fulbright

10 years.

Nicholas Kristof

Women in Recovery is a tough program. For the first few months, participants are pretty much under house arrest. They have ankle monitors. They share apartments with other participants and are ferried back and forth between their apartments and the Women in Recovery offices, where they get intensive therapy and group classes.

Katelyn Fulbright

I was super resentful towards the program. They wouldn't let me talk to my husband. Of course, he's a felon, been in prison four times.

Nicholas Kristof

There's a real effort to largely cut them off from their old friends who were in the drug world to help them start over. And Katelyn hated all that.

Katelyn Fulbright

So, after about three months, I went on the run.

Nicholas Kristof

A year after running off, Katelyn was caught. She was shipped back to Tulsa in handcuffs and then sent to prison. But at this point, she was just exhausted of that life. She'd had it with addiction and crime.

Katelyn Fulbright

I took a chance, and I rolled the dice. And I said, OK, let me go back. I didn't want to at all, but my mom did. And I was tired of breaking her heart. I came back August 10 of 2022. It was the best decision of my life.

Nicholas Kristof

And when you got back the second time, did things go more smoothly?

Katelyn Fulbright

Oh, yeah. Well, because I was finally done with the ex-husband.

Nicholas Kristof

With help from the program, Katelyn was able to divorce her husband. She enrolled in therapy.

Katelyn Fulbright

I got really involved in Narcotics Anonymous. That has been my saving grace.

Nicholas Kristof

And as she advanced through Women in Recovery, Katelyn earned more freedom. She won the right to live on her own, to hold a job. And frankly, it's often tough for people who come from addiction and prison to find employment and housing. People are suspicious of them.

In Tulsa, it helps a great deal that Women in Recovery has an excellent track record of success and has the trust of businesses. So there are lots of Tulsa companies that go out of their way to offer apprenticeships to graduates of the program. In this case, an oil company took a chance on hiring Katelyn as an administrative assistant.

Katelyn Fulbright

If I stay with this company and I go take classes that can help better and further my education, they can help me really go places. And I'd love to become a geologist. I don't ever have to put drugs back in my body again to make me feel better. I'm now attracted to men who have it together, who work jobs, who are clean and not using drugs. And that's because I made a change within me, not because I'm just like, oh, I need to go for these guys. Whenever I started to change me, that other stuff started to come along.

Nicholas Kristof

I attended the graduation for Women in Recovery.

Archived Recording

Coming back to the program opened the door to where I'm staying today.

Nicholas Kristof

It's an incredible scene. It's a gymnasium full of people, and the audience is composed of family members who had given up hope on them. They had the police officers who had arrested them, the judges who had sentenced them. And they're all wildly cheering these women.

[APPLAUSE]

There are thousands of treatment programs around the country. And for me, at least, Women in Recovery is the most effective one I've seen. And that's partly because it lasts a lot longer than others. And a lot of them are over after a month or two months.

And when somebody has been wrestling with addiction for a decade, I mean, the truth is, it's really hard to put that behind you after a month or two. So, Women in Recovery benefits from having a much longer program. And it also is very comprehensive. It really tries to deal with every aspect of the problem and then ushers people into jobs, into housing.

I've reported a lot about addiction, partly because it's personal. My own community in Oregon has suffered a great deal from it, and I've lost a lot of friends to it. And when I explore these topics, it's usually, frankly, pretty depressing. It's about overdoses. It's about the shame families feel. It's about mourning those who they've lost.

But this is different. It is so wonderful to go to a graduation like Women in Recovery's and emerge as full of hope and have tears of joy, not pain and sadness. And it's a wonderful break for me to write about addiction in a context that is full of pride and joy and success.

[MUSIC PLAYING]