# ‘It’s wonderful watching human beings blossom’

## *Transitions helps women grow into new lives*

**BY ROB CULLIVAN**

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Beatrice Williams, a graduate of Mt. Hood Community College's Transitions program, was one of the commencement ceremony's featured speakers and credits the program for helping her become a more focused student.

JIM CLARK / GRESHAM OUTLOOK

**You might call Cynthia Dettman a florist.**

Except it’s not roses or petunias she’s cultivating – it’s minds, hearts and souls.

Dettman is the former coordinator and currently a part-time instructor with Mt. Hood Community College’s Transitions program.

Transitions primarily helps single mothers, women in poverty, minority and immigrant women and homemakers who have few job skills get back to school or into the work force, Dettman says.

The latest group of graduates includes a woman who was sold into sexual slavery when she was young, a woman who fled religious persecution in her homeland and a woman who almost lost her children because of her own problems with substance abuse.

The three-month program helps students develop a career goal, get to know the college and its resources, make friends and develop time management, study and career skills. Students also learn how to apply for scholarships.

Transitions students take three classes: Life and Career Planning, Transition to College and Life Transitions. They also benefit from support groups, mentoring, counseling, resource referrals and other services. The program offers work and volunteer opportunities on campus that help students develop communication and leadership skills.

“It’s wonderful watching human beings blossom,” Dettman adds. “I’ve seen the program really transform lives.”

#### Commencement

On March 15, Dettman joined several other folks at Mt. Hood to honor the latest group of students to complete Transitions, which has operated at the college since 1985.

“Many of these women are coming from low income backgrounds,” Dettman says. “They’ve been in survival mode a long time – not planning ahead, thinking ahead.”

However, it’s clear that is beginning to change.

Take Beatrice Williams, 37, a Portland married mother of four.

You wouldn’t know it to meet this pleasant, friendly, well-spoken woman, but she almost lost her children forever because of drug addiction and survived a childhood punctuated by sexual and mental abuse.

Born in Lowell, Mass., the oldest of seven children, Williams’ mother was 14 when she had Beatrice.

“I pretty much helped her raise my brothers and sisters,” she adds. “I would feed them and take care of them.”

She suffered sexual abuse at the hands of a male relative, she says, and grew up attempting to numb the pain of her childhood by drinking and doing drugs.

She stayed sober when pregnant and always worked hard at different jobs. Nonetheless, she found herself falling again and again into a self-destructive cycle with men that eventually led to her giving up her children.

When a foster family caring for her two boys wanted to adopt them around 2005, she knew it was time to clean up.

“I lose my kids, I lose my identity,” Williams says.

She’s been sober for five years and has volunteered for SE Works, a work force development organization in Southeast Portland, as well as Human Solutions, which serves needy and homeless folks.

Williams has helped ex-inmates learn how to use the Internet and helped Human Solutions determine whether families are eligible for services.

“In the process of both jobs, I learned how to be my own resource specialist,” she says, adding she obtained her general equivalency diploma in 2009.

Nonetheless, she felt she needed more education and decided to enroll in Transitions. In particular, she credits the program for helping her learn how to study efficiently.

“You don’t really realize there’s a need for time management until you get a whole bunch of things you have to do,” she says, noting she wants to eventually work in mental health services. “You can’t just go with the flow. You need structure.”

#### Her story

One of the things Dettman does to help women in Transitions is get them to look at their pasts differently.

Most of these women are mothers, she says, and society doesn’t overtly value the skills of mothering. However, she gets the women to write out success stories, from being a mother to organizing a church committee, to show them they have more resources than they realize to get a job.

“They’ve learned how to handle a budget,” she says of their mothering. “They’ve been a teacher, a counselor, a priest, a therapist.”

Many of the women have never considered any type of job outside of fields traditionally dominated by females, including clerical work, she says.

“We kind of help women break out of those stereotypes and look at a broader range of careers as well,” including engineering and computer work, she says.

**Party’s over**

Angela Shields, 33, a single mother, has been an exotic dancer, a waitress and a bartender. She made lots of money back in the day, but spent it on booze and drugs, she says. It was a decade-long party, from her late teens to her late 20s, she says, noting she’s had two failed marriages, has broken her back and even tried to kill herself once.

“All of that partying eventually led to emotional wreckage,” she says.

However, she became a mother a little more than a year ago, and has been turning her life around.

“I wanted to go back to school,” she says. “I just wasn’t quite sure where to start.”

She decided to attend Mt. Hood Community College and learned of the Transitions program. Through the program, she says she’s gotten excited about her future and wants to work in financial management.

“I was just kind of floating through life and would have found myself in just another job instead of a career,” she says. “It was amazing. It was probably the best thing that ever happened to me.”

That’s a sentiment shared by Williams, who says she was impressed by the empowering feelings she gained from working with the other women in Transitions.

“Not many people get to survive addiction and abuse with the amount of sanity you need to get through the rest of a life,” she adds. “That’s the one thing that I thank God and friends and family members for.”

**Transitions success stories**

• Kimberly Pearson, a 35-year-old single white mother of six survived horrific abuse as a young woman. She was sold by her mother to an older man and lived in a violent relationship for many years. Her goal is to become a social worker with young children.

• Etta Harris is a single 46-year-old African American mother of two who was drawn into a life of drugs and prostitution as a young woman. She turned her life around several years ago, developed professional skills in catering and has returned to school. She plans to move up in the catering industry after obtaining a degree at Mt. Hood Community College.

• Stella Tyshevsky is a 46-year-old married mother of five who emigrated from Ukraine because of religious persecution. Stella learned English in less than four years and has demonstrated excellent reading, writing and speaking skills in Transitions. A nurse in Ukraine, she plans to train for health-care employment here.

• SaraBeth Heyman is a 34-year-old white single mother of two. She dropped out of school because of a ninth-grade pregnancy, but is now on her way to becoming a mental health counselor.

• Rosa Morfin is an 18-year-old Mexican-American single mother who lives with her boyfriend and his family. She suffered abuse as a young girl and got into trouble, skipping school and hanging out with the wrong crowd. She is considering the Mt. Hood cosmetology program, but will take general education classes first to strengthen her reading and writing skills.

• Cresen Hill is a 45-year-old single mother with two sons, ages 17 and 20. She grew up in an abusive, alcoholic family and worked as a bartender. She has survived thyroid cancer to start college in 2012 and plans to become a journeywoman electrician.

• Peggy Gust is a 59-year-old white grandmother of two. She has worked hard all her life to help her family survive after her husband was seriously injured in a car accident. They lived in the country, at times without running water, and Gust cared for her elderly, disabled mother for many years. She plans to complete the Early Childhood Education program at Mt. Hood and work in daycare or preschool.

**Transitions facts**

Transitions began in 1985 and is one of hundreds of federally funded programs around the country to help homemakers and single parents develop job skills. Transitions was expanded in 1999 to include Transiciones, a program for Latina women.

Transitions is funded with a combination of public and private funds.

Approximately 85 percent of participants enroll in college after completing Transitions.

Approximately 50 percent complete a full year of college and report that they obtain better jobs because they have improved their self-esteem and skills, including communication, computer and teamwork skills.

Approximately 20 percent go on to complete an associate degree and 10 percent obtain a bachelor’s degree or master’s degree.

Transitions graduates have won numerous awards and scholarships, including the 2002-2003 Outstanding Student Scholar Award and the Ford Opportunity Scholarship at Mt. Hood.

To learn more about Transitions, call 503-491-7680 or visit mhcc.edu/StudentServices.aspx?id=445.