

Diane M. Gaines: Benefiting Woman Offenders



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She is an African American who grew up in a drug-ravaged community, quadriplegic, cancer survivor, and single parent of three children, Diane Gaines is a woman who has had every reason to rely on others for support.

Instead, Gaines has become the mainstay of the Education and Assistance Corporation's Women's Opportunity Resource Center (WORC) in Hempstead, a program that transforms women offenders with substance abuse problems into self-supporting women who can contribute to their community and take care of their children.

On August 18, 1977, Diane Gaines suffered a spinal cord injury. She was hospitalized for nine months and left the hospital confined to a motorized wheelchair.

Finding herself in the position of being challenged but undaunted, she enrolled in a local community college to keep her mind active while she adjusted to her disability. Soon after her enrollment, Gaines realized that her educational pursuits helped her to concentrate more on her intellectual ability, and less on her physical disability.

She majored in Criminal Justice/Correctional Counseling at California State University. There she earned a Bachelor of Science Degree, in 1981, and a Master of Science degree, in 1982. Since she moved to New York, in 1983, she has worked as a peer counselor and advocate for the disabled.

In 1987, Gaines became Project Director for the Women's Opportunity Resource Center at Education and Assistance Corp. (EAC). The resource center is an alternative to incarceration program for female offenders. Another EAC program, for which she serves as a social worker consultant, is the Shoplifter Program, an alternative program for first-time shoplifters.

Her private counseling practice covers many aspects, including disability, correctional, adolescent and individual counseling. In addition, Gaines is an Adjunct Professor, Criminal Justice Department, at

C.W. Post University.

Notwithstanding her busy professional schedule, Diane is a consummate activist and volunteer. A trained mediator, she serves in that capacity for EAC's Mediation Alternative Project. She is a member of the Professional Advisory Councils of the Southside Hospital Home Care Unit, the Lutheran Long Term Home Care Program and New York State Education Department's Vocational and Educational Services for Individuals with Disabilities.

In order to maintain and improve her physical condition, Gaines must engage in regular physical therapy sessions. Her phenomenal mental, emotional, and physical triumph over her handicap was epitomized in 1989, when she went to Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami, to participate in the "Miami Project." A month undergoing this cure for paralysis resulted in her leaving the hospital, no longer dependent upon the motorized wheelchair, but able to ambulate with the use of a walker, and minimal use of a manual wheelchair.

WORC offers the women offenders a variety of social, medical, educational, legal and vocational services to speed their recovery. Gaines is personally involved in client counseling.

Women in the WORC program are particularly inspired by Gaines' response to her multiple adversities. One client says, "Look at what Ms. Gaines has overcome, and she's there for us. How can we not try as hard as we can?" Another said, "Ms. Gaines did everything my mother would have done for me if she were still alive. That is why I am currently in recovery and going to business school, to strengthen my dreams of being someone special, just like she said I could be, as long as I don't give up."

WORC has graduated 800 women in the last ten years. Mayor James Garner of Hempstead credits Gaines with turning women's lives around. He says, "I have seen at WORC graduations, women I knew from Hempstead but did not recognize. I remember them as ravaged and bleary-eyed. They are now sharp, confident and ready to face the world."

Since her cancer diagnosis in 1993, Gaines helped start the Long Island chapter of the Sisters Network, a support group for African-American breast cancer survivors.

Gaines has received numerous awards commending her achievements, but she says her proudest accomplishments is being the mother of three daughter, Dionne, a junior at John Jay College, Nicole, a sophomore at Morgan State University and Richina, a ninth grade student at Half Hollow Hills Junior Higher School.

Honored For Steadfast Diligence

Recently Diane Gaines was accompanied by her three daughters when she journeyed to Washington, D.C., to receive a \$100,000 award as the recipient of the Robert Wood Johnson Community Health Leadership Program.

Ten \$100,000 awards consisting of a \$5,000 personal stipend to the awardee and \$95,000 for program enhancement, were given out.

Now in its fifth year, the Robert Wood Johnson Community Health Leadership Program encourages and rewards individuals who have overcome substantial obstacles to deliver quality health care to underserved communities. The program supported by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, is the largest private philanthropy dedicated exclusively to improving the health and health care of Americans. The Foundation gave \$267 million in grants in 1996.

[Diane M. Gaines is a woman on the move, admired by women who have had the pleasure and honor of being in her company and highly regarded by those who have yet to meet her. She has shown this nation that one is never disabled, they need only a chance to show what they are able to accomplish. My sister, you are a role model for everyone. God be with you and your daughters who are also showing what young people can attain, when they are surrounded by a positive, encouraging spirit.]

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