

# On the farm

Women in Illinois rehabilitated from drugs, gangs and prostitution

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JOHN W. KENNEDY



The farm is a Christian alternative to what the former drug addicts, gang members and prostitutes who live there might face otherwise: prison, homelessness or even death.

Doris Nazario didn't start using illegal drugs until age 31. Even so, she became addicted to heroin and crack cocaine for 17 years.

In 2002, the homeless Nazario sought overnight shelter at New Life Covenant AG, a Hispanic church in the Humboldt Park neighborhood on the northwest side of Chicago. There she learned of a new church-sponsored residential facility, New Life Farm for Women. Carmen Colon, a New Life Covenant chaplain who conducts jail ministry, led Nazario to salvation in Jesus Christ.

Once staff pastors Rico and Alice Altiery began discipling Nazario, an amazing change began to occur. Rico allowed Nazario to teach classes even before she graduated from the five-month program. Nazario, who is taking Global University ministry classes, now is administrator of

the facility near Cambridge, Ill.

The farm is a Christian alternative to what the former drug addicts, gang members and prostitutes who live there might face otherwise: prison, homelessness or even death. Many of the women have lost their homes, jobs and families. For some, the farm is a last opportunity to salvage their lives.

Far removed from the distracting influences of America's third-largest city, the farm's rustic tranquility helps the women seek God's restoration. Their mentors have credibility because they have overcome similar situations.

## VETERAN LEADERS

The Altierys have operated New Life since its genesis five years ago.

"We've been through storms in life," says the 57-year-old Alice, a fast-talking bundle of energy. "Rico sold everything we had for



Women at the farm take copious notes from well-worn Bibles during study time around the kitchen table.

heroin. Many times I wanted to leave him, but divorce would have been the simple answer."

Instead, Alice regularly invited her husband to church as he used drugs with her brother, Carlos, who later died of a heroin overdose. The Altierys' marriage survived Rico's decade of illegal drug use, four years in prison for selling heroin, and street gang activity with the Latin Kings.

Rico, 59, accepted Jesus as Savior in 1980 and soon began working with street gangs and in prison ministry. Later he served as Sunday School superintendent, deacon and elder at New Life. During more than 30 years at the church, Alice taught Sunday School, led Missionettes and headed Women's Ministries.

Then came the day New Life Covenant Senior Pastor Wilfredo "Choco" de Jesus presented a

challenging assignment for his trusted lay leaders: Quit their careers and move 160 miles west to a 15-acre cornfield the church had purchased.

The Altierys, who have been married for 41 years, accepted the challenge, sold their home, quit their jobs and said goodbye to their three adult children and seven grandchildren who remained in Chicago.

## TOUGH LOVE ADJUSTMENT

The Altierys have become selective in whom they accept to the farm because many young women — those in their teens and 20s who have not quite hit rock bottom — flee the program for life back on the streets in Chicago soon after enrolling.

"Women who are here really want a life-changing experience

with Christ," Rico says. "This is not a place for a woman to come and dry out before going back to the same lifestyle."

Most enrollees have accepted Jesus as Savior before making the trek west, according to Nazario, who interviews prospective clients.

"I've been in the world, I know the game," says Nazario, who has restored relationships with each of her four children. "These women need structure and tough love."

Marelyn Garcia is at the farm after 13 years of heroin and alcohol addictions, prostitution and living on the streets of Chicago. She lost custody of her three children. After going through three secular rehabilitation centers, Garcia didn't have a cure and she had an inflamed liver that threatened to kill her.

Nazario suggested Garcia give her withdrawals to Jesus.

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The first night in the program, Garcia, who weighed only 100 pounds, begged for medication to help her stop shaking. Nazario declined, and repeated her advice. Garcia, 33, agreed, and slept through the night for the first time in 10 years.

### STRUCTURED DAY

The farm is situated in a two-story house on a state highway. No sign brings attention to the inhabitants. There are no sirens and gunfire, only chirping birds and an occasional rumble of a semi-truck.

Christian-themed posters and paintings line interior walls. Comfy couches and chairs create a homey atmosphere.

Upon arrival, few enrollees know much about the Lord or the Bible. But from the time they wake up until the time they go to

bed, they are focused on Scripture. Hour-long devotions occur both morning and evening.

Every weekday at 11, 1 and 3, the women study theology, personal hygiene, housekeeping or job skills in the living room using the Bible as the guidebook.

For the first month on the farm students are isolated from the outside as a way to break from their old life: no television, phone calls, visitors or trips.

“The first couple of weeks we’re still dealing with a lot of attitude,” Rico says.

After the first month, residents begin attending nearby Watermark Assembly of God in Geneseo on Sundays.

### LIFE’S TRAGEDIES

Although 25 women have graduated — including two who

are now deacons at New Life Covenant — twice as many have failed to complete the course. There are no locked doors or handcuffs holding them here. Although Rico exhorts disgruntled clients to stick it out for 30 days, he will drive them to a bus stop a few miles down the road anytime they demand to leave.

“It’s the drugs that call them back,” Rico says. “I can understand; I’m an ex-junkie myself.”

Lori Davis, 45, spent time at the farm in 2004 after more than 20 years of alcohol and cocaine abuse. She stayed clean for more than two years — then started drinking again. A diagnosis of cirrhosis of the liver convinced her to return.

“If I’d just applied the tools the farm gave me I wouldn’t be back here,” says Davis, whose trag-

edies have included losing her 9-year-old son, Valentino, in a fatal accidental shooting followed by her stay in a mental institution. “The first time here I just wasn’t ready. But I’m ready to change and submit.”

The farm is designed to be a training ground for women to live on their own and establish routines that will help them become the mothers and daughters they neglected to be before. While daily prayer and Bible study go a long way into reshaping thinking, simple disciplines of taking care of their bodies and their living space are necessary, too.

The sparse bedrooms are immaculate. Words to Bible verses are painted on the walls. It is just the kind of environment Angela Carter needs.

Carter, 30, is confident, charismatic and articulate. The daughter of Puerto Rican and Caucasian parents she came to the farm depressed and at the point of despair.

Growing up she abused alcohol, smoked marijuana, and endured molestations, beatings and rapes. That resulted in promiscuity and work as a stripper.

Yet Carter found respectability. She attended college, became an administrative assistant, and operated a cleaning business for well-heeled customers. Yet cocaine and methamphetamine use contributed to the custody loss of two young children and pushed her into prolonged depression.

“God has been working in my life for quite some time, and I surrendered it all to Him when I got here,” Carter says. “He’s given me an understanding of why I went through what I did.”

*Rico Altiery is a zealous teacher in hour-long sessions.*



### DAILY SESSIONS

Rico developed the curriculum, using some material from Teen Challenge. He puts a great deal of preparation into the classes, which are more interactive camp meeting than lecture. As the animated Rico stands behind a pulpit, he is always imploring the women to think about the consequences of their behavior. The thought-provoking sessions feature almost continual questions and answers. The ladies take copious notes.

By the second month of these gatherings, Rico is blunt and transparent. “If you throw that Bible away you’re not going to find God’s fulfillment,” he says. “You’re going to find pain and misery.” He gives heartbreaking accounts of women who left the farm prematurely and wound up stabbed and strangled.

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Lori Davis, Marisol de Jesus and Marelyn Garcia listen attentively in Rico Altiery’s class. Alice Altiery (inset, third from left,) also instructs the women during their five-month residential stay.

# World Health Sunday

April 29, 2007

Today, we honor the people we call on when we're sick or have a medical emergency—our health care providers.

God has blessed our nation with the finest health care system in the world. You make this possible. We say

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The women are dressed casually, wearing tennis shoes, sweat-pants and T-shirts emblazoned with "New Life for Women" on the front and "Building Godly Women for the Kingdom of God" on the back.

It's not uncommon for the women to spread Bibles, commentaries and notebooks all over the kitchen table to study between classes, which include Scripture memorization and exams.

The boarders learn to cook a variety of dishes and clean. After meals they leap to their feet and sing praise songs as they work. They also scrub the floors, clean the toilets, and carry out the garbage as part of their weekly chores.

The disciplines are meant to help the women kick long-established habits. Marisol de Jesus started doing drugs at age 13: marijuana, followed by Ecstasy and cocaine. Then came a 12-year addiction to and peddling of heroin.

Her mother, alarmed at Marisol's skinniness, convinced her to give the farm a try. Last August, de Jesus stayed only a week.

"I wasn't ready," admits de Jesus, 36. "I didn't like praying. I didn't want to hear about God all the time."

But when her children, now in the care of her parents, expressed concerns she would die from a lack of food, de Jesus agreed to return. "God opened my eyes through my kids," she says.

## A BRIGHTER FUTURE

The farm has received county government approval to con-

struct a dormitory for an additional 15 women. Funding will come primarily from New Life Covenant, which has grown to 3,000 attendees from 125 in six years.

Meanwhile, in Chicago, the New Life Dream Center opened in February and will function as both a first-step orientation before women go to the farm as well as a place for aftercare. The follow-up has been a missing element as some economically deprived graduates return to urban society and the familiar route of hustling and wasting away.

Carmen Colon, 40, is in charge of the around-the-clock Dream Center program for up to 18 women. Aftercare involves individualized Bible study, putting a

résumé together and obtaining a general equivalency diploma.

"When they get back to the familiar we don't want to rush them," says Colon, a former drug addict who accepted Jesus as Savior after being evangelized by the Altierys.

Meanwhile, the Altierys keep hoping and praying that Satan won't snatch any of their graduates away.

"When we hear that one of the girls has fallen, it hurts us they didn't put their whole trust in Jesus," Rico says. "We can only do so much. The girls have to do their part." **tpe**

JOHN W. KENNEDY is news editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*.

E-mail your comments to [tpe@ag.org](mailto:tpe@ag.org).



Marelyn Garcia has a constant reminder above her bed of her new life in Christ.