

DAILY NEWS

From criminal to counselor

Monique Degivenchy was on a downward spiral until she stopped falling into trouble, thanks to the Fortune Society.

"My father wasn't around. I'm an only child, my mom was around, but in my teens, I was rebelling. I was arrested for the first time at 13. I was smoking weed six or seven times a day, I was drinking like a fish.

I was with some friends, and that night, we didn't have any money left, so I and two of my friends, we saw a girl we knew from junior high and we said, 'We'll take her stuff and pawn it.' We hit her and took her things and by the time we got to Delancey Street, the cops were there and they arrested me. I got put on probation.

"At 16, I was off probation, but then I dropped out of high school. I didn't think they was teaching me anything. I had no motivation. I went to a college where you could get a G.E.D. and college credits at the same time, but I stopped going.

"When I was 17 I became an exotic dancer. The same friends I got arrested with, one knew a guy, he had a couple girls, he was like a pimp, but for dancing. I needed money so I called him. He told me where to meet him and it was an after-hours club, a down-low spot. I danced there for a month,

A NEW DAILY NEWS FEATURE

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and he introduced me to a guy named Steve. He would take us to New Jersey in a van with bodyguards and we'd dance there. I did that for a little while, I met more people, and I got into actual clubs. I was making a name for myself. My stage name was M&M. I made \$400 or \$500 a night in the clubs, about \$200 in the after-hours clubs.

"Then one night when I was 19 I got arrested for possession of pot. I spent the night in jail. The third time I got arrested was seven days later. For gun possession. I had lots of guy friends who would ask me to hide their gun. This one friend asked me to hide his .380 and I did. "How it happened was a guy I knew

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since I was 10 asked me to braid his hair. We were having this deep conversation, and all of a sudden I felt like he was gonna'rape me. We were fighting, he punched me in the throat, he was saying all this stuff to me,

and I was feeling like I wasn't going to win, he was too strong. But he got up for a minute and I went to my room and got the gun. I said, 'I'm gonna shoot you.' I shot, but I hit the mailbox. We were at the [opening] of the door. Then the door shut behind me and I was locked out, so I put the gun on the window sill.

"Someone heard the shot and called the cops. They came and saw me, my clothes torn, no shoes, and said I fit the description of 'the lady with a gun.' They found it and said, 'We have to take you in to central booking.' I spent a month in jail. By this time, I had no hope. I had a felony, I thought my life was a dead-end.

"I got sentenced to five years' probation and six months at the Fortune Society program. They work with you doing group therapy, psychotherapy and help you work on your self-esteem. At first I was still smoking weed because I figured out a way to beat the urine tests. But there was a counselor there and she was cool and understood where I was coming from. She said, 'You got 30 days to get your act together or I'm sending you back to your probation officer.' If it wasn't for them getting on my butt, I would have wound up back in jail.

"I got excited to finish my program at Fortune. My mind was focused on doing good things for myself, for the first time ever. I was enjoying what I was doing. And it took up all of my time, doing group during the day, and at night I would give presentations. That was a good thing for me. And on Oct. 22, 2000, I told my friends I'm not smoking or drinking anymore. When I was in jail, I didn't smoke or drink. I just thought, if I could do it then, I could do it now.

During the time I was at Fortune, my mom got evicted, so I was in transitional housing in Harlem, and I didn't want to be there. I kept going to my classes at Fortune Society and even when I was done, I kept going back. I said, 'I don't have nothing to do, nowhere else to go.' So I started interning with them, running some groups if they were short-handed. They referred me to Act One, where you learn substance-abuse counseling. I was 21 by then and I decided to go into the field. Now I work at Samaritan Village in Queens. I got my own apartment. It's pretty basic. I don't make much, \$27,000 a year, but enough to pay rent. And I love what I do.

"I think that people on my block, they think they're a product of the environment. They get caught up in that. Where we come from people don't have jobs. We don't see nobody else getting it together to look past that. Everybody had a dream when they were a kid, and I say, remember what that was and go for it. You gotta' get past the blame game. Push yourself just a little bit.

And once you accomplish one goal, you want to get to another. It's like that, that's how it works."

Fortune Society: Helps parolees and at-risk youth break the cycle of crime and incarceration through a broad range of services.

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as told to Michelle Megna