

Gemeinschaft Job 'Dream Come True'

New Director Amison Gets Her Chance

By **NICK DALBY**
News-Record Staff Writer

Jennie Amison has been through life's wringer and survived. Now it's time for a little pay back.



Amison

The 51-year-old Norfolk native is the new executive director of Gemeinschaft Home, a residential transitional program run by the Virginia Department of Corrections.

"I'm excited about being here," she said. "It's a dream come true — something I've wanted to do for a long time."

Amison is a graduate of Norfolk State University and holds a bachelor's degree in special education. She used her degree to teach mentally challenged children the ins and outs of life in the Virginia public school system. Somewhere along the line, she lost touch with herself.

"I didn't know who I was," she said. "I decided to go back to graduate school and get my master's degree."

But graduate school didn't last long. Halfway through the process, she dropped out to join the teaching staff at the Southeastern Virginia Training Center for the Mentally Retarded in Chesapeake. She also developed a love affair with alcohol.

Five years later, Amison took a leave of absence from her state job to address her addiction and change her life.

"I was sick and tired of being sick and tired," she admitted. "I needed to find out who I was before I could help others."

Today Amison is a self-admitted happy and healthy recovering alcoholic with 11 years of sobriety under her belt.

During those 11 years, Amison became a certified substance counselor for Virginia and joined the DOC to work with people whose lives have taken a wrong turn. She believes it's her fate to assist them in finding their way.

"That's why God spared me, to do the work I'm doing," she said. "You can save everybody."

Since 1999, Amison has been working for the DOC as the eastern regional transitional specialist at the Indian Creek Correctional Center. She replaces Jim Gilkeson, who will coordinate the pilot program.

"It was a hard decision for the DOC (to give me the position)," she said. "But they gave me a chance."

Praise For The People

It's not a chance she is going to blow.

"I have to set a standard for this community and the people I work with," she said. "I run a tight ship."

As for the community, Amison has high praise for the residents of Harrisonburg and Rockingham County, who, for the most part, have welcomed Gemeinschaft Home and its 41 prison parolees.

"There are a whole lot of communities where you can't put a residential transition center," she said.

Gemeinschaft Home is a respite for a select few felons

going from prison back into society, and is operated under contract with the DOC. It was established in 1986 on Mount Clinton Pike just beyond the city limits of Harrisonburg in Rockingham County.

Residents, who stay an average of about five months, are required to hold a full-time job and pay for their room and board.

The vast majority of residents were imprisoned because of substance abuse. The program does not accept sex offenders or violent criminals.

Residents are required to participate in addressing the problems that led them to drugs, crime and prison. Before they are turned out into society, they have to demonstrate they are ready to accept the responsibility of becoming productive members of society.

A survey of residents who completed the Gemeinschaft program in 1994 showed that 77 percent have not been incarcerated since leaving the program and are still employed.

If Amison has her way, those numbers will be going up.

"Someone held me to high standards," she recalled. "I know these guys can do it to."

And Amison doesn't give up on anyone or anything, especially herself. She plans to attend Eastern Mennonite University or James Madison University to complete her master's degree.

Staff writer Nick Dalby can be reached by e-mail at ndalby@dnronline.com.