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## Rising again

*After overcoming a heroin addiction, Palo Alto High grad gives back to nonprofit that turned her life around*

by Jocelyn Dong

Like many graduates of Palo Alto High School, Allie Foster has moved to another city and started making a life for herself. She majored in women's studies at UC Santa Cruz, works full-time for a film company in San Diego and is following her passion — photography.

Her life, she says, is inspired and full.

But when Foster graduated from Paly in 1998, neither she nor her mother, Catherine O'Brien, could have predicted the rocky path that would lead to her present happiness. Nor could they have predicted the depth of gratitude they would come to feel toward a San Diego nonprofit, Shakti Rising. It is the organization they credit with saving Foster's life.

An articulate young woman, Foster recalled teenage years that were typical of her peers'. She was ambitious academically and enjoyed art and music. She also had a deep concern for social justice, got involved in activism and belonged to a church.

"I went off to college like anyone," she said. "I didn't really expect to go down the path I did, that's for sure."

But with a curiosity about life and a naïveté about the power of drugs, Foster eventually experimented with heroin. Soon, and much to her horror, she was hooked.

"I woke up one day, and I was in so deep. ... I was in over my head," she said.

A scared Foster confided in her mother, O'Brien, in the summer of 2001, shortly before her senior year in college.

"I thought by having that conversation, that would be the end of it. I didn't have an understanding of how strong a grasp (heroin) had," Foster said.

O'Brien sought advice from the Stanford Faculty and Staff Help Center and started attending Al-Anon, a support group for friends and family of people who have addiction problems. At the same time, Foster made numerous attempts to pull free of the addiction — but none succeeded.

It would become a five-year-long ordeal for the family, as Foster entered rehabilitation programs and the legal system.

"It was a vicious cycle of institutionalization and failure," Foster said. As program after program couldn't help her kick the habit, "it just got hopeless. It was exhausting."

Enter Shakti Rising. The nonprofit, designed to help women ages 15-30, takes a holistic approach to addressing complex issues

ranging from addiction to abuse to depression. Services include counseling, life-skills education, courses on nutrition and health, communication and financial management classes, yoga, massage therapy, "energetic healing" practices and more.

A family friend told O'Brien about Shakti Rising, and O'Brien said she knew the philosophy and methods would be a good match for her daughter. She was right.

"When I walked in the door, they didn't see this horrible history of failure," Foster said. "They assumed from the beginning I was going to make it. I was not only going to survive, I was going to thrive."

Foster calls it "the whole-person approach. It was the soft, loving approach with women and men who have your back from the get-go.

At Shakti (the word is Sanskrit for "life force"), those who come for help aren't treated like patients, Foster and O'Brien said. The women are apprentices — responsible for participating in and learning from the Shakti community of staff members, volunteers, fellow classmates, graduates of the program and others. They are responsible for their recovery and for giving back to others.

Within a year, Foster said, she was clean and sober. However, she stayed in the program another two years to develop leadership skills and strengthen herself in other ways.

Since graduating last fall, she serves on the Shakti Rising's board of directors. She calls the program, which boasts an 80 percent success rate, "miraculous."

Out of gratitude, O'Brien decided last summer to host a fundraiser for the nonprofit, which will take place in Palo Alto on March 21 and feature the theme of 100 doodles by 100 celebrities. Foster and Shakti Rising's founder and executive director, Shannon Thompson, will speak.

As thankful as she is for Shakti Rising, Foster also said she owes a debt of gratitude to her family and friends in Palo Alto.

"It's really humbling. I'm so grateful for all these people back home who have been rooting for me all along," Foster said.

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