

## Dancing in the rain “ with help from Alston Wilkes and others

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By Emily Cooper

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“Prescriptions became my way out,” the former USC student said. “I began taking more and more until I was taking 14 a day. I could do probation and do it well. I could hide my addiction. I never got help fixing the problem.”

Finally, she encountered the judge who changed her life. “I’m going to give you three and a half years to work on yourself,” she told Roberts. “She didn’t say ‘three and a half years in prison.’” Prison introduced her to a life-skills class led by Alston Wilkes Society’s Barbara Rippy. Kairos Ministries, a Christian, ecumenical, lay-led prison ministry, also was a help while she was in prison.

“When you come home, it’s a scary thing for an offender. If nothing has changed, it’s already decided for you. I saw many people coming in and out, in and out,” Roberts said.

She expressed her gratitude for her mother and stepfather who were keeping her small son for her, but she found her clothes and even her bed packed away. “It was like I was forgotten.”

Roberts knew she needed help and called Rippy, the community service coordinator, who helped her find a job. “It was kind of a God-thing,” Roberts said. “They were servicing people just like me.”

She now has a job with DSS, driving clients.

Shopping with her mother, she ran into a prison guard and spoke to her. Her mother hushed her. “Have you ever thought how you embarrass your son and your family when you tell people who you are?” her mother asked her.

But that’s just what she’s doing, telling people who she is and what they can become while she works and pursues a counseling degree via internet.

“You can’t keep us locked up forever — we do come home,” she reminded the volunteer leaders and supporters of Alston Wilkes.

The Alston Wilkes Society is a S.C. organization founded by its namesake, a Methodist pastor, in 1962 as the S.C. Therapeutic Association. It has members in 27 states, however, who support it in various ways, and about 4,000 volunteers. When Wilkes died, volunteers kept the organization afloat until Parker Evatt was hired as the first executive director in 1966. In 1972, Evatt hired Anne Walker, a member of Trinity UMC in Sumter, as a speaker and trainer. When Evatt became head of S.C. Corrections in 1987, Walker moved into his position and has stayed.

Evatt, a Virginia Wingard UMC member, was recognized. The Rev. Fred Reese, who hired Evatt, also was recognized. Columbia lay leader Brenda Hook, who has been a volunteer since the late ‘60s and is a member of Mount Hebron, received the Parker Evatt Alston Wilkes Society Volunteer of the Year award in absentia.

Amy Moss, a United Methodist received the James W. Sparks S.C. Youth Worker of the Year awarded by Judge William Byars. The "intensive supervisor," on call all the time, works with 20 children or youth being released from the Department of Juvenile Justice. "She never gives up on them. She loves them all," Byars said. "She goes to see them at home, goes to the hospital; gets to know the family and any problems in the home before they come out of DJJ. Byars is seeking volunteers to work with less-troubled children and youth, for example, teaching girls how to dress.

Other awards went to Sylvia Randolph, Brian Bowen, Wilson Horton, Alan Ali, Helen Wall, ANOC instructors at Fort Jackson and Priscilla Gable.

The society is planning to open a new residence for homeless veterans in Greenville.

Walker said when agency had seen that it was going to be \$155,000 short in this hard-times year, a grant of \$300,000 spread over two years fell into its lap in less than 24 hours.

The Alston Wilkes Society has re-entry centers in Columbia, Charleston and Florence for federal offenders. Nine community service coordinators serve most of the 46 counties providing case management counseling and employment services to offenders and their families. Since 1996, the society has provided a stable environment for homeless veterans.

For youth, it provides a high-management group home and a clinical day-program alternative school in Columbia, and therapeutic foster care and intensive family services statewide.

What does the Alston Wilkes Society need? "Being a good Methodist, your prayers, your presence and your gifts," Walker said. In addition, you might volunteer to lead Bible study, work with youth or give monthly birthday parties for veterans. Find opportunities in your church to hear about the Alston Wilkes Society, whether it's an invitation to fill the pulpit on Sunday morning or speak at a Wednesday night supper.

They can always use gift cards and hygiene kits. A kit can be a plastic bag with such things as deodorant, toothbrush, toothpaste, shampoo, soap, a razor since their clients are outside of prison. Monthly birthday parties are welcomed.

The numbers are small enough for any church to help: 10 kids in the high management group home, ages 11 and up; a clinical day school with 16 children; the Columbia veterans home has 18 residents and the new one in Greenville will have more.

For information, call Walker or a member of her staff at 799-2490.