

Women's Fund

Starfish Program Ignites Passion to Give Back

Just months after leaving Anna Marie's, a battered women's shelter, Autumn King walked the familiar hallways with a renewed spirit and determination to give the women now living there something she had longed for: a night of pampering.

As she watched the women prepare for the event, she remembered the somber feeling that surrounded them. They did not know what was in store. But she did.

During her free time, the mother of three had collected three car loads of donations for the women and called on businesses to donate their services for what she named the "Goddess Event." That day, the women were pampered by professional hair and make-up artists before stepping in front of the camera for a Glamour Shots photo shoot.

"She was just this bright shining light for the women that were there," said Cara Ruff, who had been mentoring King through the Starfish Program. "I've seen Autumn go from someone who was in an unstable situation and insecure about her future to a woman who has blossomed and become a leader in this community."

It was during King's 16-month involvement in the local Starfish Program that she

developed not only the Goddess event, but also a deep passion for giving back. She has since leveraged her network and local resources to collect more than 100 Christmas gifts for clients at Independent Lifestyles Inc. who would have otherwise gone without.

"It's so important for people to be involved (*in the community*) because every pebble in the river makes a ripple. It does have an impact," King said.

Giving Back

Community service is an essential part of the program designed to help victims of domestic violence reclaim their independence. The Starfish Program takes a personalized and comprehensive approach by providing needed resources ranging from rental assistance to school books and working with each woman to achieve her goals.

"It really helped me be more honest with

myself and learn more about who I am and who I want to be," King said.

King and fellow Starfish graduate Shelly Rakhshani, who started her own nonprofit and wrote a book while participating in the program, will join Ruff as mentors for the next class of women. "I want to be a part of seeing someone else benefit," King said.

Dollars Make Big Impact

The Starfish program operates on a shoestring budget of about \$20,000 for each 16-month class with most of the support coming from the Women's Fund of the Central Minnesota Community Foundation.

"It has been so rewarding to hear the stories of the women like Autumn and the impact the Starfish Program is having," said Barb Carlson, director of development at CMCF. "This program really does demonstrate that one person can make a difference."

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Support Starfish

- Buy "Making a Difference...One Star at a Time," a book about how one woman helped another start living the life she always wanted. Available at starfishprogram.org. Proceeds benefit the Starfish Program.
- Donate to Starfish Fund online at CommunityGiving.org or by mail: Central Minnesota Community Foundation, Starfish Fund, 101 Seventh Ave. N, Suite 100, St. Cloud, MN 56301.
- Get involved by calling Cara Ruff at (320) 529-9000.



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