

Unique program helps women escape streets, transform lives

By Kathleen Toner, CNN

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Nashville, Tennessee (CNN) Many cities have one: an ugly stretch of road lined with cheap motels, dollar stores and liquor marts. Often, women and girls are also part of the landscape, selling their bodies at strip clubs or on the streets.

In Nashville, one such area exists on Dickerson Pike. It's a tough environment, where even the weeds pushing up through the concrete — thistles — have thorns. Many of the women who have walked this road are hardened by a life of abuse and addiction. Caught in a struggle for survival, they can't see a way out.

That's where Becca Stevens steps in. For nearly 20 years, Stevens has dedicated her life to helping women escape prostitution, addiction and trafficking — and providing a place for them to heal.

"Those scars are deep, but it doesn't have to be the end of the story," said Stevens, an Episcopal priest. Her nonprofit, Thistle Farms, now has five residential communities in Nashville. Women stay for two years at no cost and with no live-in authority figure. The women support one another.

"None of the women ended up on the streets by themselves. And so it makes sense that it takes a community to welcome them home," said Stevens, who started the program in 1997. The group provides a host of services, such as medical and dental care, therapy, substance abuse treatment, legal help and education. Through the housing program, more than 200 women have transformed their lives.

In 2001, Stevens and a few residents started making bath and body care products. Today, Thistle Farms is also a \$2 million company that employs more than 75 people — two-thirds of whom are graduates of the residential program. The products are sold at more than 500 stores worldwide.

CNN's Kathleen Toner spoke with Stevens about her work. Below is an edited version of their conversation.

CNN: How did the idea to start the Thistle Farms company come about?

Stevens: We realized that the women we were serving were still dirt poor, so we created this bath and body care company so women could have jobs, earn wages and make choices in their lives. It made perfect sense to me to make body care products that were about healing bodies — bodies that had been used and abused for so long. When we started out, it was me and four women using borrowed pots and pans and stirring body balm and candles. We started calling ourselves a cottage industry; there wasn't such a thing as a social enterprise.

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CNN: Your philosophy for the work is that love heals. The women have built the business. They run sales, accounting, manufacturing, shipping, and they keep growing the company so that more women can come through and be a part of it. From the healing oils that waft through the air to the spirit of resilient women, it is inspiring work.

Stevens: For me, "love heals" means that I take all these lofty ideals that I have, and I try to put them into practice where it means something to people: a (place) to sleep that's safe; a paycheck that you can cash. I also think it means that you suspend all judgment. I'm not asking, "What did you do?" I'm just saying, "Tell me your story" — and that I can hear it and accept it. Truly, the lines that separate any of us are thin. There's so much more that we hold in common, and we are better when we all come together. I realized how powerful love can be for healing.

CNN: Many of the women you help had rough times growing up. How do you relate to them?

Stevens: After the death of my father when I was a small child, I experienced sexual molestation for years. And I realized that is something that I held in common with a lot of the people I was meeting on the streets and in jail. I don't compare my story with any of theirs, but I do think it gave me a lot of compassion. The roots of trafficking, prostitution, and addiction are all connected in childhood trauma. Unfortunately, a lot of it is sexual childhood trauma. And when you sexualize a young girl, it opens up the door for abuse and for monetizing relationships. It is a gateway to want to numb some of that pain through drugs, and for other abusers to see them as vulnerable.

CNN: What's the significance of the name, Thistle Farms?

Stevens: I love thistles. Some (people) think of them as a noxious weed, and yet they have this beautiful purple and deep center. When we were going down to meet the women on the streets, that was the last wildflower that was there. So it made sense to name our company after it and remind us all that something to be discarded is (also) something to embrace and see beauty in. That's what we're reminding women: They are fully bloomed, wonderful gifts already.

Want to get involved? Check out the [Thistle Farms website](#) and see how to help.

Link: <http://www.cnn.com/2016/06/02/us/cnn-hero-becca-stevens/index.html>