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## New Opportunity School Helped Brandi Clark Find Purpose in Life

By Carol Timblin

self in a group of women who had similar experiences to hers. Like Brandi, they felt trapped and wanted to better themselves. Over the next three weeks the New Opportunity women learned how to write resumes, how to dress, how to interview for a job, how to build self-confidence, how to help each other. They kept daily journals, studied Appalachian literature, and attended cultural events in the area. They also took advantage of health services (mammograms, pap smears, dental work, eye exams, and glasses) that were available to them.

“The New Opportunity School gave me another chance in life...a chance to get on my feet and do something with my life,” Brandi says. “I gained confidence and began to believe in myself. We all empowered each other. I decided I wanted to go to college and make something of myself.”

After the New Opportunity School session ended, Brandi was accepted in the freshman class at Lees-McRae that fall. Her experiences at the May Wildlife and Rehabilitation Center on campus opened her eyes to opportunities in that field. As a sophomore, she decided to major in Wildlife Biology, with a concentration in rehabilitation. A part of the program included traveling to New Zealand, where she studied the yellow-eyed penguins who shelter and breed there. When she returned to Lees-McRae, Brandi decided to remain at the school for an additional year to pursue a second major – Biology and Health Sciences – and to prepare herself for veterinary school. An excellent student, she will graduate in 2018. Meanwhile, scholarship and work-study cover Brandi’s college expenses.

“Brandi is one of the most self-actualizing students I know,” notes Nina Fischer, director of the May Wildlife Center. “Once she makes up her mind, she does everything to make that happen. She often attends the symposiums at NC State and uses every opportunity to make connections there. That’s how she came to work on one of their turtle teams. Brandi

now mentors other work-study students at Lees-McRae, plus she knows how to take care of herself.”

The first person in her family to go to college, Brandi will be the first one to receive a degree. “Everyone in my family is extremely supportive of me,” she says. “They are proud of the way I have turned my life around.”

Were it not for the doors that New Opportunity School opened for Brandi, she might not be where she is today. “New Opportunity School gave me the confidence to do what I am doing, and it gave me a purpose in life,” she says. “I had wanted to be a vet since I was five years old. I realized I wanted to go to veterinarian school and study wildlife and exotic medicine after college. The school also prepared me to travel to New Zealand and experience the world. I am 29 now; I’ll be 35 when I get out of vet school.”

As a house sister to New Opportunity students at Bluefield College in Virginia last summer, she looked at the program from another perspective. “It was exciting to see the change in the women...to see them take control of their lives and seriously look at what they can do,” she recalls.

“Brandi is an example of what the New Opportunity School can do for women,” says Jennie Harpold, director the LMC program. “It helps them find employment, as that is usually their most immediate need. It also helps them develop a plan that best suits their future needs. Brandi chose to further her education here, while some of our other graduates take advantage of the educational opportunities at community colleges.”

In 1987, Jane Baucom Stephenson, a Banner Elk native, founded the New Opportunity School for Women at Berea College in Kentucky, where her husband John was serving as president. The program began with a phone call from Gurney Norman, an Appalachian writer, asking if the college had a program that might help a woman who was recently

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divorced and needed to know how to get a job. Shortly after that, a foundation looking for a worthy program to fund knocked on the college door.

“I had one week to write a grant proposal,” recalls Stephenson. “About 15 people gathered in our living room one day to brainstorm and design the program. We talked about classes, internships, and housing. John insisted we include Appalachian lit classes in the program, and Gurney believed creative writing would help the women build self-esteem.”

The original mission of the New Opportunity School for Women—“to improve the financial, educational, and personal circumstances of low-income, middle-aged women in the Appalachian region”—has not changed. Over the course of its 30-year history, the school has transformed the lives of more than 900 graduates who have completed the program at one of its three sites—Berea College, Lees-McRae, and Bluefield College.

“A survey of all graduates of all programs this past year revealed that 41 percent of the children of our grads answering the survey have gone on to higher education—and four have earned Ph.D.s,” notes Stephenson. “Furthermore, 15 percent of the grandchildren of our grads have pursued higher education. Thirty percent of our graduates have completed Bachelor’s and/or Master’s degrees, and 76 percent have become employed part-time and/or full-time. An additional 13 percent are self-employed. Interestingly, 17 percent have retired from employment.”

I truly believe that to educate a mother is to educate a family,” she adds.

Stephenson continues to be involved in the program at all sites, serving wherever she is needed and getting to know the students. However, her primary focus these days is raising money for the NOSW Foundation, which provides funds for scholarships, health care needs for the women, and operating costs at the three sites.

“I especially enjoy meeting the students each year and learning how the program has changed them,” she says. The New Opportunity School for Women is now taking applications for the summer session, June 11 – July 1. Application forms are available online at <http://www.lmc.edu/academics/nosw/index.htm>