

## Message from Patrice Gaines: You can recover from bad choices

**P**atrice Gaines, a journalist who spent 15 years as a reporter at the *Washington Post*, now enthralled audiences with her life experiences with the same edge of truth as she did as a reporter.

When she talked to several hundred students at the Village's alternative schools, they listened quietly. A stillness came over this audience of teens, many of whom have experienced life shattering experiences as she did. She tells them about the cycle of self-destructive abuse that she underwent as a teen and a young woman. Her abuse included drug addiction, being victimized by a man who whipped her with a leather strap and battered by other men. She stands before the students, without notes or a podium, and goes over, quite candidly, the details of her experiences. She starts out by telling the student that as a teen she had low self-esteem and didn't really love herself. This positioned her to become desperate for love and consequently to accept superficial words of love as real sentiments.

During her talk, she constantly reminds her audience that people have control of their lives, can walk away from destructive behavior and can recover from mistakes. Her prescription for change starts with self. She emphasized that one has to change from within and to give up the "blame game."



When one is nude, she suggested asking yourself "who am I?" Her image of herself is that she is created in the image of God and all things are possible.

She recalls that she was satisfied for her parents to take care of her baby while she went from man to man searching for love. She kept her drug dealing boyfriend's drugs in her apartment "because he told me that you are safe and don't look like the type that would be using drugs." This landed her in jail on a charge of possession with intent to distribute. When her parents brought her two year old daughter to see her through a narrow window in the jailhouse, Patrice thought "my daughter was searching for me and can't find me." That tearful moment motivated Patrice to change her life. She finally did, but not without more turbulence and self-destructive behavior.

Eight years after her arrest, she had an opportunity to go to journalism school which began a new and prosperous career for her. She became an award winning journalist. While at the *Washington Post*, she investigated a murder case over four years involving a man who received a life sentence. Her articles raised doubts about his conviction. While in the Village, she met with members of the UW School of Law Innocence Project which had selected this case as one of their projects.

Many of the students have read her book *Laughing in the Dark: From Colored Girl to Woman of Color—A Journey from Prison to Power*. Through E-mail, she and many of the students correspond on a regular basis. After her lecture, students came up to her and told her about their imprisoned mothers or friends or mothers who had abandoned them or abusive situations. "I know about valuing a man over children," one student said. Obviously, Patrice had moved close to home with this young audience.

Today Patrice crisscrosses the country as a motivational speaker, telling her story at colleges, conferences and most of all at prisons and drug rehabilitation centers. She refers to herself as a "justice reform activist" who encourages people to consider forgiveness. She has written a new book, *Moments of Grace, Meeting the Challenge to Change*, which is now in the bookstores. Patrice Gaines is in center of photo.