

# MONARCHS *and* MIRACLES

**Blue Monarch helps women trade abuse and addiction for happier, healthier lives**

*Story by Trish Milburn • Photographs by Robin Conover*



Being accepted to Blue Monarch's program truly became a life-changing experience for residents, from left, Patricia Fulcher, Jennifer Milholen and Jessica Ramsey. At right, Blue Monarch founder and executive director Susan Binkley discovered her life's mission — to help women and their children recover from abuse and addiction — in a dream.

Everything happens for a reason. Susan Binkley and a dream she had 15 years ago are living proof of that well-known saying. That dream became reality when Blue Monarch, a residential program that helps Tennessee women and their children recover from addiction and abusive situations, opened its doors in 2003.

Binkley is the first to say that her journey to establishing Blue Monarch was an unlikely one, beginning the moment she woke up from that vivid dream. In it, she was required to read a thick book that detailed all the aspects of setting up a program for abused and addicted women and their children.

"I even joked that I'd intercepted someone else's dream," says Binkley, who lived in Williamson County at the time but later moved to Marion County. "It was a powerful dream, but I didn't think it had anything to do with me."

She also jokes that back when she had the dream, she didn't even really like groups of women or kids other than her own daughter. Time and circumstances have a way of changing a person's outlook.

Some time later, while driving through Tracy City, she noticed the old high school building and was shocked to recognize it from her dream. Still, it seemed like just an odd coincidence — but not for long.

In 2000, Binkley and her husband bought a commercial building in Sewanee, and with a business partner, Susan opened a bakery and cafe called The Blue Chair. Four months later, the business partner decided to leave and return to real estate.

"Overnight, I found myself in the food business, and I'm not a cook," she says.

Thus began some 60- to 70-hour weeks, which led to her pretty much hating life. Still, she stuck with it and began noticing all the women who would come in looking for work but who couldn't keep jobs because of various bad home situations (no one wants to come to work with a black eye). She started thinking how great it would be if these women could escape those types of situations, some way they'd be able to care for their children in a safe environment and work. Then it hit her that the ideas coming to her were leading straight back to that dream.

"What God was asking me to do was overwhelming," she says. "I felt I wasn't a good candidate. I struggled over it, cried over it for several days. Finally, my daughter, who was 17 at the time, said, 'God will love you the same if you say yes or no.' How could I say no to that? I made a deal with God that I would do it as long as I didn't have to do any public speaking. Of course, I've been doing that ever since."

After the decision to accept the call to establish the program came another odyssey of trying to find a place to house it. By this time, the old high school building in Tracy City was available. Binkley met repeatedly with the city council there to obtain use of the building, but it didn't work out, and she walked away discouraged.

What followed might seem like spine-chilling coincidences to some but miracles to others: First, out of the blue came a \$1,000 check from a woman in California who wanted to help. Her daughter, a Sewanee student, had told her what Binkley was wanting to do. Second, Binkley began looking for a large property out in the country with three homes and then found the perfect haven

near Monteagle. A former bed and breakfast was up for sale, and since the owners were moving out of the country, the three houses were to be sold completely furnished. When Binkley admitted the \$1 million asking price was way out of reach, the owners said they'd always felt they'd built the B&B for someone else, for women who were hurting.

And finally, this is where all those meetings in Tracy City proved their worth. Among members of the local Rotary Club she had met was Howell Adams, who wanted to see the recovery facility happen. He generously offered to secure the loan on the condition that she make the payments.

Even with this wonderfully generous offer, Binkley was still worried. What if she couldn't make the payments or cover expenses? For some reason, Binkley was moved to show her proposal to a frequent customer at The Blue Chair, a quiet young man she called "Mysterious Ben." When she finally did, he spent about two weeks asking specific questions and visited the property. That's when he revealed his family had a foundation and that Binkley's project was one they'd like to help fund. The worry about the first three years of expenses went away.

Even the name of Blue Monarch seems to have been touched by a higher power. Binkley wanted to work a butterfly into the name because of the imagery of a butterfly coming out of its cocoon after its metamorphosis. That's when a TV movie caught her attention. She hap-

pened to hear a character talking about the monarch, how it's fragile yet determined. It's a survivor because it flies south in the winter instead of dying. Binkley thought that was the perfect tie to what she hoped the home would be for the women and children who came there. She added the "blue" because she was already using that color in the name of her business.

Since the first resident walked in the door in 2003, Blue Monarch has helped more than 300 women and children and recently admitted its 100th resident.

"It's been an amazing experience," Binkley says. "It started out trying to help women become self-sufficient, but it turned out to be so much more. They are healing from emotional wounds. I've seen so many really come alive here."

One of those women is Jessica, a 29-year-old mother of two and a recovering methamphetamine addict. Deadening of emotions is one of the many horrible effects meth use has on a person. Binkley says when Jessica first arrived, she didn't express emotions, and it took a long time for her to begin to do so. Now, after 16 months at Blue Monarch, Jessica seems happy, confident and is looking forward to regaining custody of her children.

"It's been a journey, but this (coming to Blue Monarch) is the best thing I've ever done," Jessica says. "The staff has given me the best support ever; they've been there through thick and thin."

The program at Blue Monarch takes one to two years, depending on the woman and her situation, and is a combination of common courses that all residents take and individualized treatment and counseling. Each morning begins with Bible study, and there is daily group time where the residents and staff talk about problems. Classes cover parenting and life skills, anger management, budgeting for the single mother, time management and an inten-



**Pat West, center, is the family life coach at Blue Monarch. Residents share cooking responsibilities and often eat lunch and dinner together. It's a family setting that many are not accustomed to when they first arrive.**



**Residents and graduates of Blue Monarch have the opportunity to work at The Blue Chair granola business. Having a job helps to provide Tessa McClure, above, and other residents with the sense of independence and accomplishment.**

sive, nine-week work ethics class. Residents who need it go off site for drug and alcohol counseling, and they can even choose some electives on site such as yoga or piano. Swimming lessons are also provided since so many of the women and children don't know how to swim.

Binkley says that women have to be out of potentially violent situations for 30 days before they can come to Blue Monarch, and there is an admissions process that determines if the applicant is really serious about turning her life around.

Because of what the women have endured in the past — living in poverty or even in their cars, incarceration and various types of treatment centers — they are shocked when they come to Blue Monarch.

"I've seen them cry when they see how beautiful it is here," Binkley says. "They can't believe someone would allow them to live somewhere like this." The pastoral, rural setting actually contributes to the healing process.

During their first 30 days at Blue Monarch, residents are responsible for taking care of the goats and chickens. In some ways, their performance of those tasks helps staff members determine if the woman is ready to start rebuilding a relationship with her children. Eventually, each resident is given a portion of the garden to tend, and all have household duties.

Because being effective and reliable employees is crucial to a successful transition to life back in the "real world" after leaving the Blue Monarch program, emphasis is placed on the work ethics class. The women are given the opportunity to work at The Blue Chair Cafe or The Blue Chair on-site granola business. The bags of all-natural granola, each of which is packaged with a small card bearing a photo of a resident and a bit of her story, are sold at The Blue Chair, at various stores and restaurants in five states and through mail order. The Blue Chair granola business benefits Blue Monarch by providing employment opportunities for residents.

As you might imagine, Binkley, her staff and volunteers have witnessed some heartbreaking stories, many of which stem from the fact that drug and alcohol abuse is generational. Binkley cites the case of one of the first graduates of Blue Monarch, a woman

whose mother taught her to use meth when she was only 14 years old and then pimped her out to pay for her own addiction. The resident had two toddler girls and had moved them 33 times in two years.

"A big part of what we do is break the cycle," Binkley says. "We like to say we rewrite the family tree."

And when the big breakthroughs happen, each is a beautiful thing to behold, far outweighing all the sadness that passes through Blue Monarch.

Binkley treasures the moments when she witnesses things really change and head in a positive direction for the women Blue Monarch helps. She talks about a resident who, because of drug abuse, came to the program very detached and unable to really connect in any way with her children. Just ten months later, the kids were playing with letter magnets on the refrigerator, being really chatty like kids can be,

and Binkley feared the mother might lose patience. But when one of the children asked her mother what a word was, the mom responded, "It's 'beautiful,' and so are you."

"I knew, right then, that the cycle had been broken," Binkley says. "Those children get to live a different life."

Binkley is proud of the parenting training given to residents, including individual parenting assessments. There have been 85 children who have re-established a relationship with their mothers since Blue Monarch opened. This could mean establishing supervised or unsupervised visitation, regaining full custody or having regular contact with them. This is over and above the children who came with their mothers to Blue Monarch and were only



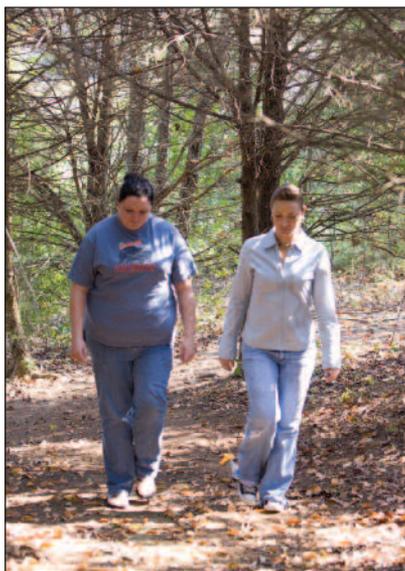
allowed to remain in their custody because of their mothers' acceptance to the program.

One recent graduate regained custody of her children and is starting school in January at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, remarkable considering that when she came to Blue Monarch, she had no shoes and had been living for a year in the cab of a truck.

The residents come to Blue Monarch carrying a lot of physical and emotional pain, and they have a long journey ahead of them. But the program is working. Binkley says the completion rate after the 30-day probationary period is 33 percent, which might sound low until you consider that is two to three times the national average. Binkley is beginning to get calls from people who are interested in starting similar programs in other states.

"We'd like to see this program repeated elsewhere," she says.

While Binkley is often the face of Blue Monarch, the one who works to spread the word about the program and gather donations for funding, the women who benefit from the program are often its biggest and proudest advocates. On a recent October day, a young woman named Tessica, 23, was enjoying a weekend visit



**Jennifer Milholen, left, and Jessica Ramsey walk along a nature trail at Blue Monarch. Once home to a bed and breakfast, the 50-acre farm provides a place of solitude and security for residents.**

from her two boys, ages 2 and 4. Considering her past involved alcohol and drugs since she was 16 and her turning point was when she was sitting in jail, it's amazing how happy she looked. Not only had she been clean for seven months, but she also is working at The Blue Chair and looking forward to getting her boys back and going to school. When she really comes alive in conversation, however, is when she talks about how Blue Monarch helped her make a big change in her father's life before he died. She wanted so much to tell him about her new relationship with God and to help him find the same, and she prayed that he would "wake up" long enough for it to happen. He did, and

because of that she's remarkably OK with his recent passing, leaving a life that had been filled with his own drug and alcohol abuse.

"This was my last chance," Tessica says. "It's a miracle from God that I'm here."

## How to help

Because Blue Monarch is totally funded by private donations, it is always in need of funds, materials and volunteers.

Binkley says they are currently in monetary need of \$17,000 to move a home to the property. The house was donated, and Binkley hopes it will be the first step in her plan to establish some transitional housing for program graduates who are re-establishing themselves in the real world outside the confines of Blue Monarch. According to Kim Seavey, administrative director, the following are the material and volunteer needs:

### Material needs:

- paper towels, toilet tissue
- laundry detergent, fabric softener
- dish towels, dish soap, household cleaning supplies
- bed sheets and comforters (all sizes)
- vacuum cleaners
- firewood
- Life Recovery Bibles (special bible that incorporates devotionals based on 12-step work)

### Volunteer needs:

- light office help
- help with maintenance and landscaping projects
- drivers (women only) to help with transportation of residents to school and appointments

- babysitters for special events and for new residents who do not yet have daycare arranged
- group to organize storage area for donations
- teacher for class on basic home maintenance and auto repair
- someone to oversee use of greenhouse and help with summer vegetable garden
- recreational opportunities for residents

### Blue Monarch contact information:

P.O. Box 1207, Monteagle, TN 37356  
931-924-8900  
[www.bluemonarch.org](http://www.bluemonarch.org)



**Before the first resident arrived at Blue Monarch, Molly, a mixed-breed stray, walked up the driveway and made herself at home. "She's been the perfect dog for us," says Susan Binkley. "She has lots of patience with the children and has been a great shoulder to cry on for many residents."**