

ANOTHER CHOICE



Matt Monarca | The Sanford Herald

Diane and Susan Henson help take care of incarcerated mothers' children, like 9-month-old Skyler. Pharaoh's Daughter also mentors the mothers once they get out.

Pharaoh's Daughter cares for kids, mentors incarcerated moms

BY NOAH GRANT

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PITTSBORO — Susan Henson couldn't sleep at night.

Her daughter had called weeks before about a documentary featuring Hour Children Inc., a New York-based organization that cares for children of incarcerated women.

"She called and she said, 'Oh my gosh, mom, did you ever think about what happens to North Carolina babies that are born to moms who are imprisoned?'" Henson said. "And that they don't have any choice? So I'm listening to her talk about how moms in this state only have two choices of where to place their babies."

Thus, Pharaoh's Daughter was formed. Started in 2011, it's a nonprofit that cares for children of incarcerated women and mentors the mothers once they leave prison. The name originates from a story in the Bible where the Pharaoh's daughter

The organization serves women and children from across the state, because pregnant incarcerated women are held at a medium-maximum facility in Raleigh. After they have their child, the women can be transported to the facility they would normally attend.

finds Moses. Without the daughter, Moses would have grown up as a slave.

Henson said the nonprofit wants to do similar work, taking children and mothers out of a culture of incarceration. The organization serves women and children from across the state, because pregnant incarcerated women are held at a medium-maximum facility in Raleigh. After they have their child, the women can be transported to the facility they would

normally attend. According to Henson, those children are usually sent to foster care or to a relative. She said foster care must approve of the mother's living situation before they can get their child back.

"It's very highly likely that if your child is still in the system, you may not get your child for months or years or ever if you don't really super get on your feet," she said.

The mother can give her child to a family member, but Henson said that has its drawbacks as well, particularly if there's a history of drugs or abuse.

"So here you are, this pregnant woman highly emotional, you're saying I can give my child to total strangers and it may or may not be safe and I could lose my child forever or I can send my child back to a known danger where Uncle Bill is still around and still is creepy and I'm going to send

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my kid there. So this is your decision and that's the only choices you have," she said.

Knowing the options, Henson decided to act and felt like it was her job to do so.

"God has brought me to this day and I have to rise to this or else I can imagine myself on my death-bed going, 'Wow, I wonder what would have happened had I done something about Pharaoh's Daughter?'" Henson said.

Pharaoh's Daughter currently takes care of one child, nine-month-old Skyler, who stays with Henson in her Apex home.

She serves as the primary caretaker, but has volunteers who help as well. Henson said they work with women with sentences of two years or less, but may change it to one year because of the attachment of the child.

At first, Henson struggled to get the nonprofit's name out there, but succeeded with the help of an inmate. She was invited to a program that assists women who are about to get out of prison. Henson told the population about Pharaoh's Daughter, and an inmate who had previously lost their child wanted to help. The inmate said all of the inmates get their hair done at the same place, so she would distribute information there.

"Within about three months, I started getting calls," Henson said. "When I got the first one, I got the second one to the 10th one. The phone was ringing off the hook."

Though trying to help, Susan said they have hit road-

blocks when trying to take in more children and with funding. She said they have chased several grants, but that they don't fit many.

"Outside of the government, no one takes babies without the parents there and we're seeing why. There's a lot of liability," Henson said. "There's a lot of things that the government ... they're not going to put their fingers in if you're the natural parent but if you're not the natural parent, 'Oh no, you can't do this, this, this and this.' OK, but the kid needs that."

Diane Henson, Susan's sister, assists with the organization, particularly with the mothers.

The work starts when the mothers are still incarcerated. Susan will "interview" the women to get a sense of their interests and what they may want to do.

"We try to guide them in the way that they're already leaning towards anyways," Susan said. "Why not get a job that you already are good at or you already love doing?"

Diane said a mother's dreams could have been crushed growing up, and that the people they work with may have lost dignity. Pharaoh's Daughter tries to build these women up, and show them they can be successful.

"(We) help them to find the things that are broken in them and then help them to find the ways to fix those things and to mend those things," Diane said. "It doesn't really matter the opportunities you are given. If you believe that you are not capable or that success is wrong for you, you won't succeed."

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