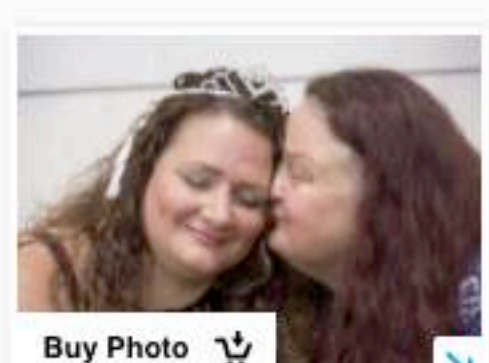


She found a 'family' in court, along with a path from bondage and to recovery

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Alicia Bishop graduates from Change Court, a two-year program to help women who have been victims of human trafficking and battle drug addiction. Liz Dufour



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She held her 16-year-old son, stroked his hair and let her tears fall. It was Alicia Bishop's day: She was graduating from a specialized court program that treats victims of human trafficking and addiction.

It had been only the second time in seven years since William had been in her arms, and Bishop had a hard time letting him out of her sight on June 28 as she mugged for selfies with friends she'd met through Hamilton County Change Court. Before she told her story, she said, "Son, you probably haven't heard all of this before."

Bishop was a "country girl," growing up happily in Florence, graduating from high school. She married and had children. She was a medical assistant to a pediatrician for seven years. But after she was prescribed pain pills for a bulging disc in her back, Bishop became addicted.

"I had an everyday life," she said days before graduation. "I took my kids to soccer practice, my daughter to her cheerleading practice. I was an everyday mom."



Police mug shots of Alicia Bishop, now 36, from Kenton County and Hamilton County jails. Between 2008 and 2015, Bishop estimates she was arrested over 50 times. (Photo: Kenton/Hamilton Jails)

An epiphany led her from life on the streets in Over-the-Rhine to Hamilton County's Change Court. She said God spoke to her and encouraged her to go to court. She got there the next morning and, after three grueling days of withdrawal, landed in the safety of Judge Heather Russell's program.

Russell, calls Bishop "Ms. Perseverance."

The judge had seen it in Bishop from the start, on May 21, 2015, when the young woman appeared at the courthouse three days in a row, sick from withdrawal and begging for help.

"Can you imagine an addict came back to the justice center and waited for three consecutive days?" Russell said at the graduation.

In Change Court, Bishop found a new family: "sisters" who fight heroin addiction and human trafficking. A cop who was more like an uncle and would not give up on her. A probation officer who'd take calls from her no matter what time it was. And a fiercely protective judge.



The program was conceived of in 2014 by a few people including that cop. Nate Young, a Cincinnati Police specialist, had seen the anguish human-trafficking victims faced on the streets and came to Russell. The judge was eager to help.

Change Court developed quickly. It is, Russell said, "a drug court plus." That's because everyone who's been through it has been addicted to heroin, with the exception of one woman, who was addicted to cocaine.

The specialized court welcomes voluntary human trafficking victims who have had misdemeanor soliciting and related charges. It offers a hub of strict probation supervision, therapy, medication assisted treatment, dental and other healthcare, job preparation, housing assistance and more. It lasts two years.



Municipal Court Judge Heather Russell holds up a stack of misdemeanor charges that were expunged from Alicia Bishop's record right before she graduated from Change Court. (Photo: The Enquirer/Liz Dufour)

"Once these women get off of heroin, they need two years free of it to really establish sobriety and remain sober in the big cruel world," Russell explained.

When Bishop spoke at graduation, she cried, she smiled, she laughed.

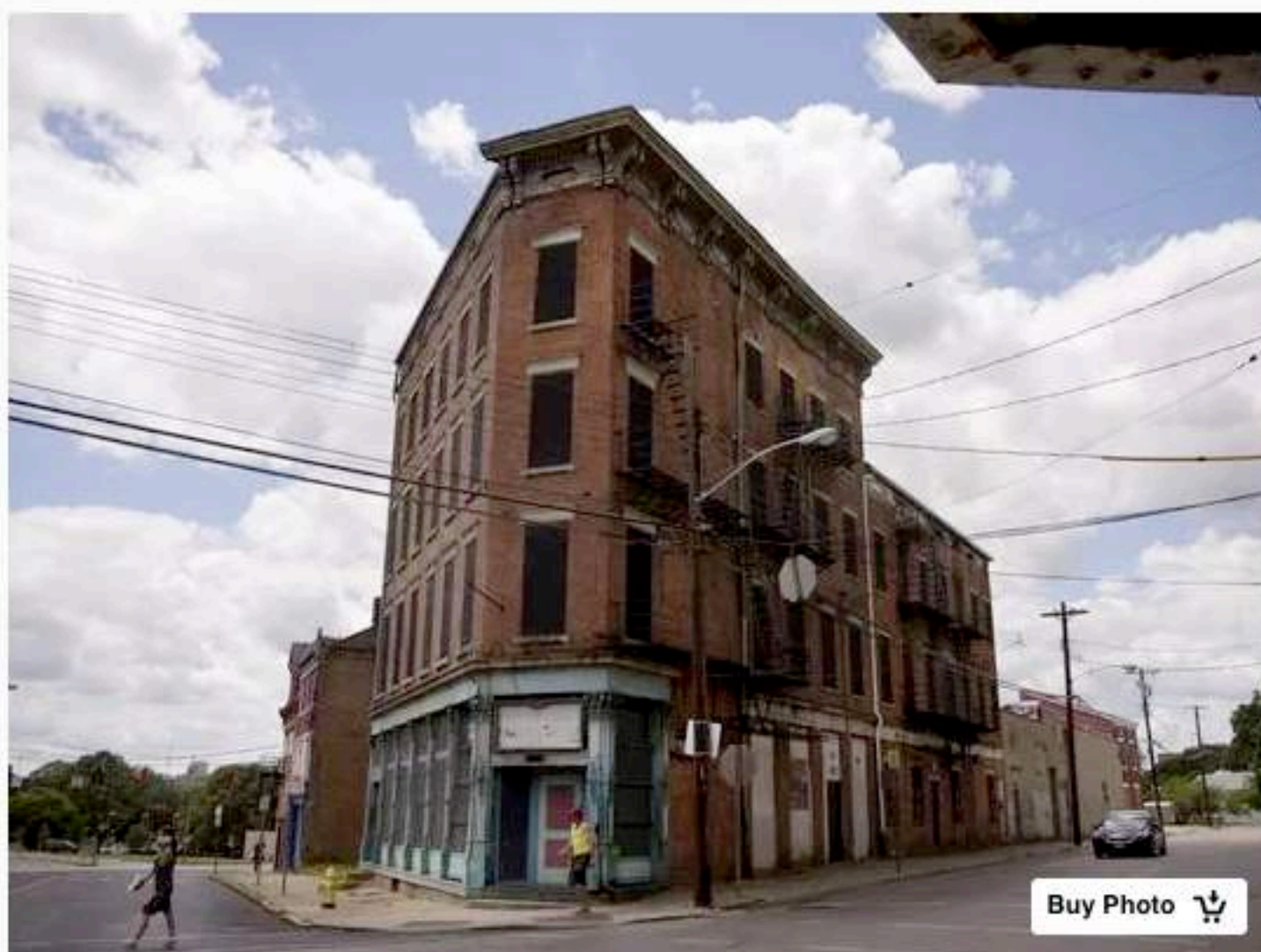
It had been "two years, one month and seven days" since she'd left the streets and heroin and crack, prostitution, pain, fear and then, in an attempt to survive, stoicism.

She'd found along her way on the streets one person she could trust. Scarlet Hudson, the founder of Women of Alabaster Ministries, cares for prostitutes through outreach. "She's my mom," Bishop says.

Hudson told of a young woman who initially balked at her offers of help.

"I found myself searching for you to be sure you were alive," Hudson told Bishop. She recalled when Bishop stopped recoiling from her and, one day, called Hudson and said, "Where are you, momma? I'm hungry."

Hudson contacted Cincinnati police officer Lisa Johnson to get Bishop to court when she wanted help.



McMicken St. in Over-the-Rhine is one of the main streets Alicia Bishop, 36, walked during the seven years she prostituted to earn money to pay for her heroin habit and support an abusive boyfriend who trafficked her. (Photo: The Enquirer/Liz Dufour)

Through Change Court, Bishop was sheltered from the man she'd called her boyfriend while living on the streets. "He human-trafficked me for his gain," she was surprised to learn through therapy. "He would kick me off steps. He pushed my head into the back of a truck bed. He beat me with a 2 by 4," she said. She gave him drugs and money for alcohol and rent.

The support she got in court gave Bishop the courage to face another judge, who had refused her contact with her three children several years earlier.

She was stunned when he gave her supervised visitation.

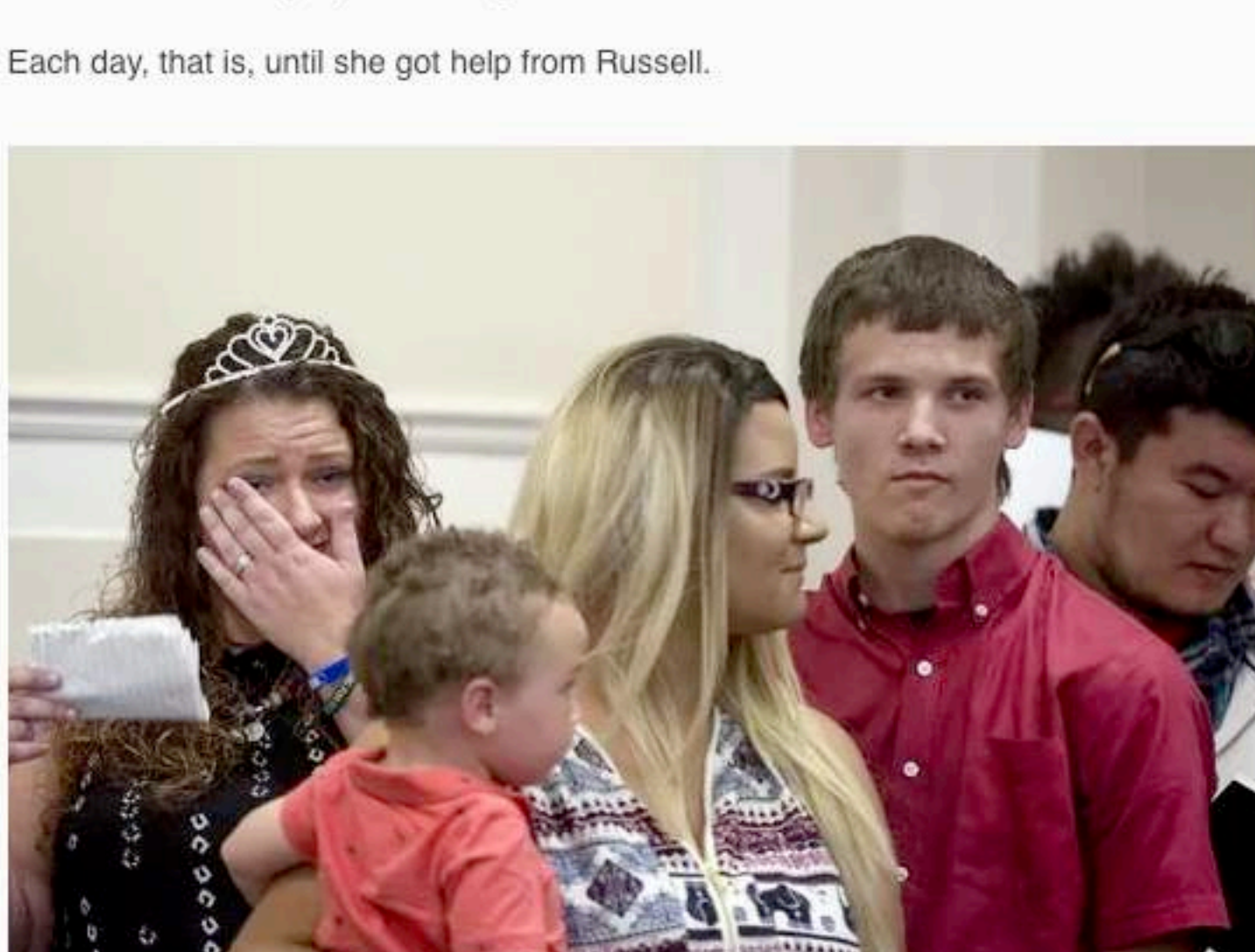
"He said, 'Many will start the race. Few will finish,'" Bishop recalled.

She works full time at a factory in West Chester and is looking for a new apartment, after staying in sober living offered by a Change Court partner, First Step Home. She hopes to get a job similar to what she'd had before: She loves babies. Right before her graduation, Russell helped with that goal, expunging misdemeanors that Bishop had accumulated during her street time.

Bishop counts more than 50 times she was in and out of jail.

She remembers that each time she left jail, she went back to the streets. Back to heroin. Back to the pimp she thought she'd loved.

Each day, that is, until she got help from Russell.



Alicia Bishop, 36, is overcome with emotion after her son, William, 16, right, and her sister, Ashley Hensley, center, and nephew, Deegan Hensley, came to see her graduation. (Photo: The Enquirer/Liz Dufour)

When her middle child, William, appeared at his mother's graduation, a smiling Russell encouraged him, "get to know her." He sat quietly, hugging back when his mom pulled him in, learning about Change Court, clapping for the speakers, including his mom.

"I always said, when I was on the streets, if they would just change their view about addicted prostitutes because they see us as criminals, and if they would just try to help," Bishop said, tearing up. "That's what we all wanted was just help. Not to be talked to like we're nothing."

"And that was the one courtroom that did that."

Change Court partners

- First Step Home for Women with Children
- The Crossroads Center/Chaney Allen
- Center for Addiction Treatment
- Talbert House/Rewards Jail Intervention
- Salvation Army/End Slavery Cincinnati Coalition
- Addiction Services Council
- Mental Health Services and Recovery Board
- Greater Cincinnati Behavioral Health
- City Links
- Dress for Success
- Additional Law enforcement partners are:
 - City of Cincinnati Police Department
 - City of Cincinnati Prosecutor's Office
 - Hamilton County Prosecutor's Office
 - Hamilton County Public Defender's Office
 - Blue Ash Police Springdale Police
 - Hamilton County Sheriff's Department

To learn more about Change Court, go [here](#).