

Cast of 'Lettie' visits the real Grace House for formerly incarcerated women on West Side



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On a cold, bright afternoon, just a few blocks from the United Center, a group of actors gather in the sunroom of an unassuming brick building. Aside from the occasional question, or snuffle, they're uncharacteristically silent. Soon, they'll act out the story of a Chicago woman who was recently released from prison. Today, the staff and residents of Grace House, a place where formerly incarcerated women rebuild their lives, have welcomed the cast of playwright Boo Killebrew's world-premiere play "Lettie" into their home.

The silence comes from the attention paid to the residents as they tell their stories. Between the nuances of each narrative, there's a common thread: Grace House is a lifeline.

“When I walked in these doors, it was like a home to me,” Angela, a resident at Grace House, tells the cast. “I hadn’t had that in a really long time.”

Grace House is part of a transitional housing program offered through St. Leonard’s Ministries, a health and social service agency founded in 1954 by Father James Jones, the Episcopal chaplain at the Cook County Jail. In 2017, Grace House provided 35 women with housing, food, clothing and support services. Of those, 19 found and maintained employment, 14 found and secured permanent housing and 4 earned their high school diplomas.

Killebrew’s play, opening this weekend at Victory Gardens Theater with artistic director Chay Yew at its helm, follows a Chicago woman at the fictional Spring House, an imperfect transitional home. Like some of the Grace House residents, Lettie’s life was affected by her drug use, leading to time served at Logan Correctional Center in downstate Lincoln. Upon release, she’s thrown back into an unforgiving world, one that demands she reconcile with her children, who have lived with her working-class sister’s family for years, while simultaneously training as a welder and figuring out what to do with the rest of her life.

Lettie’s story fills a gap in the pop-culture prison tell-alls, like “Orange is the New Black,” with a focus on the painstaking, tedious and terrifying moment of transition. It asks: What comes next?

An average stay at Grace House is nine months. Today, the cast gets an hourlong tour from a few residents and staff members.

Near the entrance of the labyrinthine building, arranged on a table, there are books such as “Life Changing Relationships.” There’s a room for family visits, with faded carpet and generic impressionist paintings hanging on the wall. There are buzzing noise machines upstairs outside of counseling offices. Downstairs, there’s a computer lab with vintage PCs, a kitchen and pantry. In the basement: two washers and dryers.

By the bedrooms, there’s a cloud of lingering hairspray, a cheetah-print blanket, a pack of cigarettes on a nightstand and a birthday balloon floating in a corner. There are framed pictures of kids, smiling, displayed on top of chests.

According to Illinois Department of Corrections figures, about 80 percent of women in IDOC are mothers. More than 40,000 are currently incarcerated in Illinois prisons; women make up about 2,500 of the prison population. Roughly one in three women will return to prison after their release.

According to St. Leonard’s, only 5 percent of women return to prison within three years after their programs. Some return to Grace House to help new residents; the majority of direct service staff and program directors

are ex-offenders, former participants or both.

A stay at Grace House provides housing and food, as well as physical and mental health services, a diploma program, job skills training, personalized coaching and a family reunification process. The home is there if a woman needs to print a resume for a job interview or plan a weekly budget.

Most important, the residents say, Grace House provides community.

After the tour, the cast gathers for a discussion facilitated by Grace House development director Sharon Kushiner and program administrator Tammie T. Morris. They're joined by alum Lorraine, and residents Angela, Sedora and Aleta. (Residents are identified just by their first names in this story to protect their identities.)

Even before the women begin to talk about their experiences at Grace House, playwright Killebrew says, "I've got to do some rewrites now."

Sedora just turned 60. She tells the cast: "It's my first time ever being serious about my sobriety. All the other times I didn't care if I lived or died." She says she's most looking forward to getting a job and keeping it.

Sedora says that if a resident, (she uses the word "sister") is out in the world, calls and says she needs help, the women of Grace House are there to support her. "That's how we live in our family," she says. "That's what we do in this house."

Lorraine says that since her stay at Grace House, she reunited with her children and will soon finish her master's degree in nursing. She says her daughter wants to be a social worker.

"Every injustice, every deficit you can think that a woman has had, I had that," says Lorraine. "And so Grace House built me up, as a woman, an individual."

Conversation later turns to new laws coming down the pipeline and the trips the women have taken to Springfield to talk about homelessness and incarceration.

A cast member asks what it's like to try to find a job after release.

"I've never made it to an interview," says Angela, noting that no one wants to hire somebody, like her, who was convicted on charges of theft. "I'm on my way," she says.

Everyone becomes quiet as she begins to tell her larger story.

“I’ve walked past that person sitting at that bus stop, nodded out, high, a bag of dope,” she says, tapping the table with her nails. “And I would’ve never been able to do that. And you’re gonna make me cry.”

She takes a breath.

“I have scars on my body that I have to look at every single day, of some of the stuff that I’ve been through, some of the stuff that I’ve put myself through. When I’m sitting at a bus stop waiting for a bus to come, people are looking at me, and you can see that — ” She covers her face for a moment and holds back tears. “That disgust in their face of, oh my god, what has she done to herself? I have to live with that every day. I don’t need you helping me live with that. So I wake up every morning and I have to see that. It reminds me of how far I’ve grown and what I’ve become.”

“And that’s all we ask,” she says. “Is just not to be judged so much. We’re still people, we’re human. We still love. Most of us have kids here. ... So for us to be able to stay strong and to be together and stand together and walk out that door and come in this door clean and sober, that is a big strength for us.”

A cast member wipes her eyes with the bottom of her sweater. Morris asks the group to remember the story of triumph on the other side more than the tears.

Another cast member asks why there aren’t more Grace Houses.

Kushiner answers: “Why do we have prisons? Are they to punish people? Are they to rehabilitate people? What are they for? What value are we placing on someone’s life who’s been in prison? ... It is cheaper to run Grace House than it is to send someone back to prison.”

As “Lettie” makes clear, not every program has the success rate of Grace House. And all women aren’t lucky enough to find themselves in a similar program.

Killebrew speaks over the phone weeks after the visit. “Lettie” is in previews. Killebrew’s plays have been performed all over the country, but “Lettie” marks her first collaboration with Victory Gardens.

Killebrew says she has since worked to further fictionalize the home Lettie finds herself in and separate it from Grace House, a place Killebrew says “gets it right.” Lettie’s experience is closer to a transitional center spoken about by Killebrew’s sister, who has worked with women in the prison system.

Grace House staff member Kushiner will be moderating a panel following the April 18 performance of

“Lettie,” with Grace House alumni and a current resident. The organization is also hosting a benefit the following week, with residents planning to attend.

It takes Killebrew a few moments to sum up the visit to Grace House. “I was so honored they shared their stories with us,” she says.

For the Grace House residents, at the upcoming performance where they’ll gather in the audience, perhaps a glimpse of their stories on stage.

“Lettie” runs through May 6 at Victory Gardens Theater, 2433 N. Lincoln Ave.; 773-871-3000 and www.victorygardens.org

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