

## Ashanti's Story

By Mary Gail Hare

The Caroline Center has helped one woman turn her life around – twice. With the skills learned there and the staff's constant encouragement, she helps to support her family and is extending the example of outreach to her community.

Ashanti, 36, who earned a culinary arts certificate through the center's vocational training program, runs a catering business from her home in west Baltimore, organizes a weekly food and clothing giveaway at her church and this summer, will give cooking lessons at a camp for at-risk children.

"The Caroline Center gave me ideas," she said.

About 10 years ago, she picked up a flyer, detailing the center's programs, at a pre-natal clinic. Job counselors and training put her on the road to certification as a geriatric nursing assistant. But life intervened. She lost her husband to leukemia, two months after the youngest of her nine children was born, and dropped out before completing the clinical aspects of the program.

Widowed and unable to provide for her family, she fell back into a life of drugs and gang violence. She was arrested for drugs and a handgun violation and faced court-ordered loss of her children.

"I went through a lot of troubles and lost my way," she said.

Through a prison ministry, she reconnected with the center. Three years ago, she started over again, this time in the culinary arts program.

"The counselors at the center never gave up on me," she said. "They told me that I was better than I was showing myself to be. They kept putting it in my head to do better. They helped me to see that I was a big part of my problem."

She has now earned her GED, remarried and reunited with her children. She is making a success of her catering work.

"I always liked to cook, maybe because my father was a chef," she said. "The center taught me basic cooking and now I make everything homemade."

She has learned to use the Internet to advertise her business and readily admits customers' "word of mouth" is helping it grow. Her experiences have made her a strong advocate for the center, especially with women in crisis. She has referred at least seven women in the last year.

"I tell them the center has helped me lots," she said. "I tell them how they helped me through lots of troubles."

All the assistance given to her has generated more of the same. She has partnered with a neighborhood grocery store, which donates to the food pantry, and she gathers gently used clothing from friends and family for distribution to the needy.

"I have my children, my own house and a wonderful husband," she said. "Now it is time to give back."

And she gives much of the credit for her business, her outlook and her resolve to the Caroline Center.

"I have gotten my life together," she said. "And I will keep it together."