

ON THE LINE

Past Experiences Inspire Social Worker to Help Others

As a recent hire, Harmony Dust, a Family Maintenance and Reunification social worker in the Santa Clarita office, is facing the challenges of her new job. But it's Dust's past that helps her appreciate the life she has now and reach out to help other families and children in need.

Dust has worked for the department since July 2005 after finishing her master's degree in social work at UCLA. Now she has a caseload of 34, many involving ugly custody battles and sexual abuse.

"It's manageable now, but it was hard at first. I inherited some cases that were doosies," said Dust. "The challenge with my job is figuring out to what extent do I play the clinical role? I try to connect my clients with service providers who will meet their needs. You have to familiarize yourself with the services. I have always had enough services, the challenge is navigating them."

But Dust knows DCFS well. At age 17 she was in foster care in Los Angeles for a short time after surviving a history of sexual abuse and a rape at 14 years old. After the rape, Dust, who had always gotten good grades, began failing in school. She was kicked out of school and, finally, was placed in a group home after an altercation with her mom.

In those days, her therapist was a huge inspiration. "I was a wild kid, running the streets. I saw her for a year and she helped me see that I'm responsible for my actions. She inspired me."

The counselor in her group home was also inspiring. "It hit me that the sky's the limit."

During her senior year, Dust worked to improve her grades. But when she graduated from high school at 18, she began another downhill slide.

Dust moved in with a boyfriend who ended up being mentally and verbally abusive. At 19, she was \$35,000 in debt, supported him and saw no other way than stripping to earn money quickly.

"On the Line" is a "DCFS News" column featuring Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services social workers whose achievements and practices epitomize the best in social work.

She danced for three years in clubs near LAX, but now admits it gave her a "false feeling of power" over her sexuality.

As the relationship with her boyfriend became more abusive, Dust says her relationship with God grew and she "began to see my value."

"I showed up to work one night at the club and I just couldn't do it anymore – something had changed. That night, I told my employer I was leaving," she says.

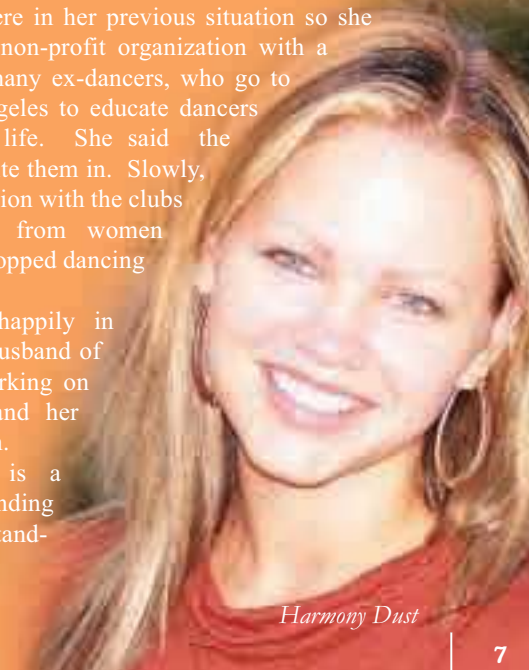
Dust broke up with her boyfriend, got a job at a group home in South Los Angeles as a residential counselor and began working on her bachelor's degree in psychology. She says she knew she wanted to be part of the helping profession.

"I saw that social workers can make a big impact," she said. "I got inspired."

She met her husband and saw there are decent men and developed a sense of purpose. She also wanted to do more to reach out to the women who were in her previous situation so she started "Treasures" a non-profit organization with a corps of volunteers, many ex-dancers, who go to strip clubs in Los Angeles to educate dancers about alternatives in life. She said the owners oftentimes invite them in. Slowly, Dust has built a reputation with the clubs and now gets calls from women who've said they've stopped dancing because of her visit.

Dust now lives happily in North Hills with her husband of three years and is working on her clinical license and her non-profit organization.

"A healthy life is a byproduct of understanding your value and understanding your purpose." ■



Harmony Dust