

Longview man escapes life of crime to become director of Mountain Ministries

By [Leslie Slape](#) | Posted: Friday, November 28, 2008 12:00 am | TDN.com



Longview man escapes life of crime to become director of Mountain Ministries

From the time he was a kid, Kelly Otton spent nearly all his time behind bars. “My life was incarceration,” he said. “I didn’t think I’d ever get out. I didn’t think I’d amount to anything.”

But today Otton, 37, has left crime and drugs behind and devotes his life to serving God. He’s the director of Mountain Ministries, a faith-based program in Rose Valley that helps felons — including him — conquer drug and alcohol addiction.

“I have a desire to see people delivered and set free,” said Otton, a humble, eloquent man who seems to glow from within.

“I’m a blessed man,” he said. “I did everything possible to destroy my life, and God preserved it.”

Otton said his volunteer service to the ministry is his way of repaying God and the program's founders, Gary and Fay Miller, for their love and trust when he entered the yearlong program in 2004.

Being trusted was a new sensation for Otton, who had been a lawbreaker since he was a kid. His record includes convictions for burglary, theft, felony eluding, forgery, meth possession and meth dealing.

"I had never been that accepted before in my life," he said. "It literally transformed me. It changed me from the inside out."

Gary Miller, 63, said he's never been betrayed by any of the felons he's counseled at the ministry that he and Fay started on his family's farm when they were newlyweds in their 20s.

"In 38 years, we've never had a crime committed, ever," he said. "When they're not using, they're good people."

A life of crime

Otton, who grew up in Cowlitz County, said when he was 5 years old he began smoking cigarettes, getting high on marijuana and drinking beer. While rifling through a car's ashtray for cigarette butts, he gave into an impulse and turned the key. The car rolled into his house.

His life continued downhill. He began skipping school in first grade and he estimates he spent less than a year in school total. Instead, he went deeper into drugs, alcohol and crime.

At age 19, he went to prison for the first time for his role in a robbery-burglary in which a young woman was shot and wounded.

"That scared me a lot," he said. He served 2 1/2 years, but "Things didn't change. They got worse. ... (Prison) corrupted me more."

One good thing did come out of prison, though. He finally learned to read.

"All of a sudden I had this desire to learn, when before, I never had a desire to open a book," he said. "I started reading encyclopedias, man, soaking in the knowledge."

But after he got out of prison, it wasn't long before he was arrested again.

"He was in jail seven times in less than four years," said Marin Fox, administrator of the Cowlitz County Corrections Department, looking at records from 1999 to 2003.

She said Otton, who sometimes visits the jail for the ministry, is "definitely a changed man."

"He was somebody that we saw a lot of (as an inmate) ... and we don't anymore, except in a more positive sense. He's helping people. You become a little jaded in this job. You think no one

changes, so it's surprising and refreshing when someone changes their life and makes a positive impact on the community."

"The Holy Spirit has taught me how to love, how to be gentle, kind and thoughtful of others, and how to be teachable," Otton said. "I used to be rebellious, but now I'm very humble."

'I wasn't dead'

Otton's epiphany came in 2002 when he crashed another car, this time at 75 mph, high on meth and pursued by police. Otton, then 31, thought he was about to die and go to hell. He told himself he deserved it because of the evil he had done to others.

He ran from the accident, passed out, and was awakened by a bite from K9 Reno.

"When the realization came that I wasn't dead, that God had given me another chance at life, I broke right there," he said. "I said, 'I'm done.'"

After his arrest he read a pamphlet from Mountain Ministries and he called Miller, who agreed to accept him into the program.

A jury found him guilty of eluding and drug possession. After serving 21 months, Otton went to Mountain Ministries the day he got out of prison on June 21, 2004.

Supported by donations

The 35-acre ranch has the feel of a commune where everyone shares in the labor and meals. All the staff, including Otton, are volunteer and don't have other jobs, and they all live on the property.

The daily schedule at Mountain Ministries includes prayer, Bible study, counseling, chores and community work, such as chopping wood for Rose Valley Friends Church, Miller said. He said he hopes to get a GED program started.

Patients pay nothing. The ranch is supported entirely by donations, Miller said.

"When we need money, we get down and pray, and God sends the money," he said. Some donations come from churches, and food banks and Grocery Outlet help with food.

"We figure we serve 240 meals a day," he said.

There are 80 people, including women and children, living on ranch. The program used to serve only men, but a women's program started in 2005 — and along with the women came children and homeschooling, Miller said. Tad and Connie Kruse run the women's program, while Otton leads the men.

The 17 women live in an A-frame built by a logger in the 1800s, while the men live about a mile further up the mountain. Otton has a trailer on the ranch. Other men stay in halfway houses in Kelso and Longview while they try to re-enter society. The ministry holds services at the Victory Center in Kelso, and eventually it will open a church at the old middle school in Rainier, Miller said.

Otton's return to jail

Miller said Otton interviews potential entrants at the Cowlitz County Jail. The program does not accept people with records of sexual offenses or assaults on small children, or those who've been prescribed any kind of pain or psychotropic medication, Miller said. All drugs, including tobacco, are prohibited.

"I've seen a number of people who have gone through the program," Fox Hight said. "It's not an easy thing. One of the things that impresses me is it's free. ... We certainly refer people there."

Miller said, "It's been a real blessing working with the system."

Otton said the first time he went to the Cowlitz County Jail to interview an inmate was a strange experience.

"They allowed me to go into the new jail, they never pat-searched me, they never asked me to empty my pockets, and they sat me in a conference room and brought in an inmate," he said. "I'm thinking, 'This is unreal.' I walked out, shaking my head, thinking, 'What just took place?'"

He only goes to town when he has to. He would rather be at the ranch, where he not only has a home and a purpose, but also a new wife, Jami, a graduate of the women's program.

"I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. I this is where I want to be," Otton said. "I don't like leaving the mountain."