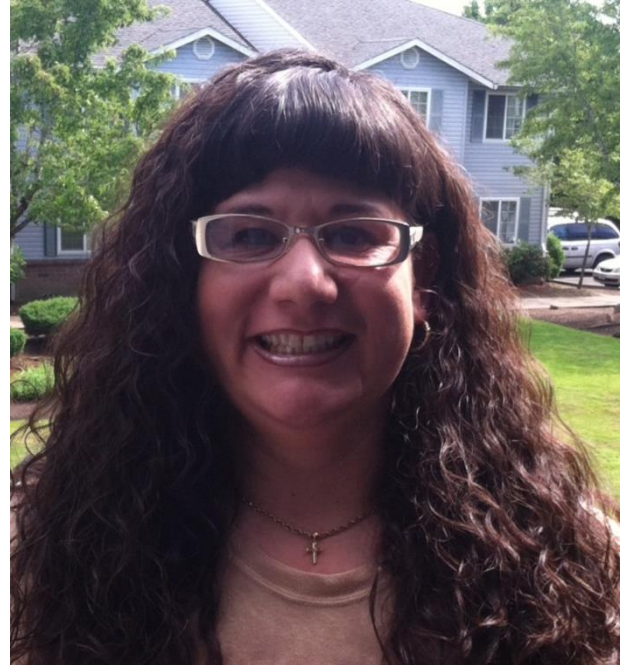


## Volunteer Spotlight – Phaedra Duarte

*Residential Counselor & Training Coordinator – Women’s Residential Center  
Hotline Advocate – Home Free*

Phaedra’s father was a blind drummer, so she learned early on that “the world is a trip!” Although she never attended college, she earned her way in and worked her way up through a number of jobs, but struggled to find a place that balanced the needs of the business with her need to treat others with compassion and fairness.

“I met all of my sales goals,” Phaedra shares about an early job as Marketing Director for an assisted living facility, “but it felt manipulative to sell what I didn’t believe in to people who didn’t want it. Some people can work in those environments and be mentally and emotionally healthy, but not me.”



She moved into administration hoping to have a deeper impact on the quality of the programming. And while she did what she could, pushing back the termination dates on a employees discovered to be working illegally so they had time to find new jobs, her tendency to prioritize people over numbers, going over-budget on incentives for staff working Christmas Day, ultimately led to her dismissal. When Phaedra began her next job as the Director of an Assisted Living Facility in downtown Portland, things got worse.

“People came in from the street thinking the residence was a shelter and I had to turn them away – even people in wheelchairs. I couldn’t deal with the sadness and had a complex social circle, my drinking took an unhealthy turn.” After telling her boss about her drinking problems, she was placed on administrative leave. Her first day of leave was her first day of sobriety, but it only took one week back on the job before she drank during a beach trip with friends, took a bad fall, and ended up with 52 stitches in her face. Soon after, she was fired for not following through on her administrative duties.

“What is my deal?!” she recalls thinking to herself when reflecting on what felt like a string of failures both at work and in her relationships. “It felt like my life was unraveling. I thought, ‘If I don’t change something drastically, I’m probably going to die.’” That’s when Phil, Phaedra’s best friend, a man with MS since 1998, offered her a room to rent. Through that surprising act of kindness, he became one of her best friends. She became fully committed to her recovery

and a relationship developed between them. As Phil's MS progressed, Phaedra became employed full-time as his care-giver. And it was through Phil that Phaedra met Kalie, her "lil inspiration", who introduced her to the language of "social justice" to define her values and encouraged her to get involved with VOA's Women's Residential Center (WRC) and Home Free domestic violence intervention program.

"Phaedra lovingly refers to me as her 'lil inspiration'," Kalie shares, "but that woman is the true inspiration. Her presence alone gives the women here a sense of ease. Between her inspirational quotes posted around the center to her attention to detail when working to train new staff and volunteers, Phaedra demonstrates her commitment to social service and her passion for helping women achieve their greatest potential."

Now Phaedra is now part of a community of people at the WRC helping others reach healthy goals. After a year volunteering for the front desk, she enjoys a deep trust with Vonedra, the WRC's Treatment Coordinator, who has encouraged her to put her skills to use facilitating training for new staff and volunteers, and providing on-going coaching on professionalism and constructive feedback. In exchange, she has learned from Vonedra about developing life skills, dissecting coping mechanisms, and dealing with society in a healthy way.

"Vonedra has helped me so much, she may not even know it," Phaedra shares. "The way she talks with clients is unbelievable: modeling where she wants them to be through validating them while empowering them to own it. She commands respect by giving respect, which is especially important because we are in a position of power."

"Phaedra is naturally uplifting and a positive influence for clients and staff," says Vonedra. "Her authenticity enables her to assess the person she is working with and find the correct strategy to fit their need. And her follow-through is remarkable; from rewriting forms to labeling equipment. If she sees a need, she fills it."

During Phaedra's early career as a project manager for a call center – feeling lost and grasping after an identity - she found herself in an abusive relationship that her brother was able to help her leave. Now she is back on the phone answering Home Free's hotline after completing their domestic violence advocate training last fall. She laughs about how opposite that experience is from the WRC.

"It's so quiet that the typing echoes, and it's not 'in your face' like the WRC where people are deeply reconstructing themselves, but since most callers aren't expecting solutions, being able to listen to them does a lot." The skills she learned in the training have enabled her to be a better safe and supportive person for her family, friends and the resources she has learned about also benefit the women at the WRC.

"It's hard to find and understand our place in the world as women," Phaedra reflects. "You don't really see that until you start learning about it." She sees how much harder it is for the women at the WRC to combat addiction while trying to dodge the stigma about their failure as

wives and mothers either without support or with unhealthy support. “To navigate the stigma, we must believe in ourselves, and so many of them don’t,” she shares. “I never had kids and I can’t imagine going through what I did with a child.”

“Phaedra is compassionate and professional, and brings patience, grace, laughter, and understanding to our survivors,” shares the team at Home Free. “She is always the first to answer her phone and goes out of her way to find resources for people.” In addition to her official roles with the Women’s Residential Center and Home Free, Phaedra enjoys the free training, gala volunteering, and becoming aware of additional programs like our Adult Day Centers, which care for adults like Phil who need full-time care.

“My deepest failure in life was not being fired, but failing to create support for people,” Phaedra concludes. “Volunteering with VOA gives me an outlet to keep my skills sharp, but I’ve also found a place where my past addiction is a positive and where only being a high school graduate enables me to understand the barriers these women face. It’s my medicine. I have finally landed where I’m celebrated for who I am and that makes me bigger. As Maya Angelou said, ‘I can be changed by what’s happened to me, but I refuse to be reduced by it.’”

**Thank you so much, Phaedra, for your commitment to supporting women with compassion, skill, and humor, and spreading your unique spirit of light and authenticity. You are indeed celebrated, and you make all of us bigger!**

*Nancy Loso, Volunteer Services Manager*