

Canon EOS D2000

Refuge for Nikki

Struggling to find a direction through community service



Canon EOS D2000

■ **A FRIENDLY HUG:** Nikki gets a hug from shelter coordinator Delon Vickers, 25, outside of The Refuge while taking a cigarette break.

Story and Photographs by
KELLY JORDAN

Aged by years of stripping, prostitution, crime, and crack cocaine addiction, Adrienne "Nikki" VonTrager, 39, now considers herself a mentor. Nikki is working off 210 hours of court-ordered community service at The Refuge, a small Christian based shelter for troubled and runaway teens, in St. Petersburg.

On an average day at the shelter about 50 teenaged and older homeless people make their way through the doors. Drop-ins receive a bag of canned goods in the afternoon, returning in the evening for a hot meal. Nikki wears many hats at the shelter, bringing with her years of experience to pass on to those willing to listen.

Nikki's first days at the shelter gave her a chance to put her experience to use. She says she identifies with the teens because most of them end up on the streets because they become isolated for being different. She feels compassion for them.

"I like the strange and unusual, because I myself am strange and unusual," she says. And she believes her own childhood was robbed from

her due to years of sexual abuse.

Nikki was raised by her grandparents in Miami. Her 16-year-old mother gave Nikki to them so that she could pursue a dancing career on Broadway.

Particularly close to her grandfather, Lester Haase, Nikki had his image tattooed on her left shoulder (photograph at top left). He died of a heart attack when she was 13. Feeling alone, and devastated by his death, the tattoo means he's always with her.

With the experience of four husbands, two children, a crack cocaine habit, and felony charges, she found herself counseling a young, homeless volunteer at the shelter (photograph at right) trying to cope after her fiancé was transported to a detox center after a morphine overdose. She explains, "After awhile it's a needle thing, not a dope thing," to the young woman who was left feeling unsure of her future.

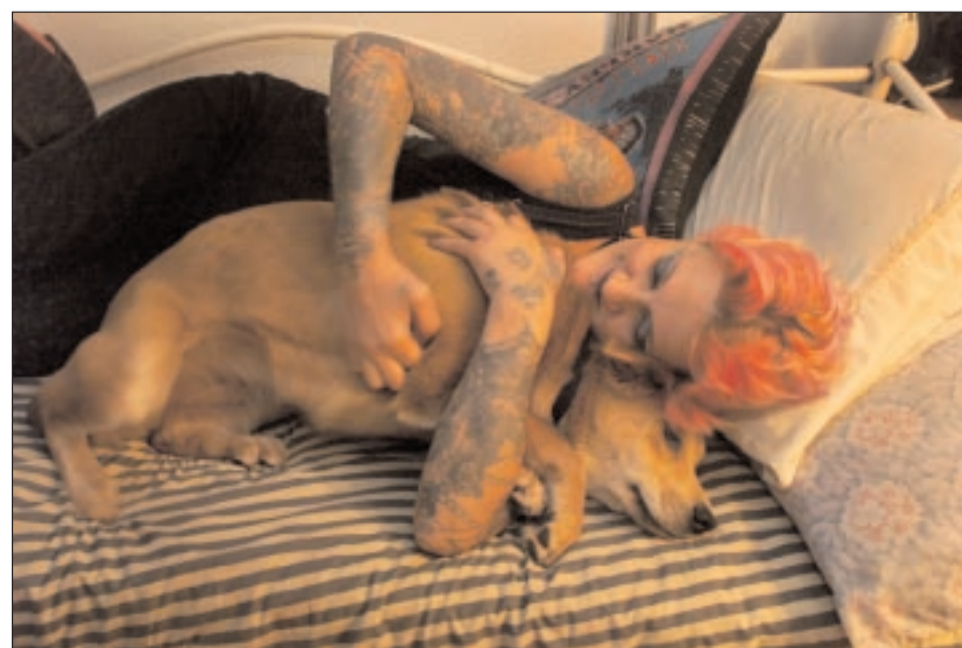
Nikki has been clean from drugs for three years and is trying hard to get on the right track. After two days at the shelter, however, she was taken into custody for driving without a license, taking yet another step backward on her long road to a new life.



Canon EOS D2000



Canon EOS D2000



Canon EOS D2000

■ **SPARE MOMENTS:** In a moment of free time Nikki uses one of her many talents piercing the eyebrow of a shelter resident, left. After a long day of service she takes her own refuge at home relaxing with her dog Daisy, above.