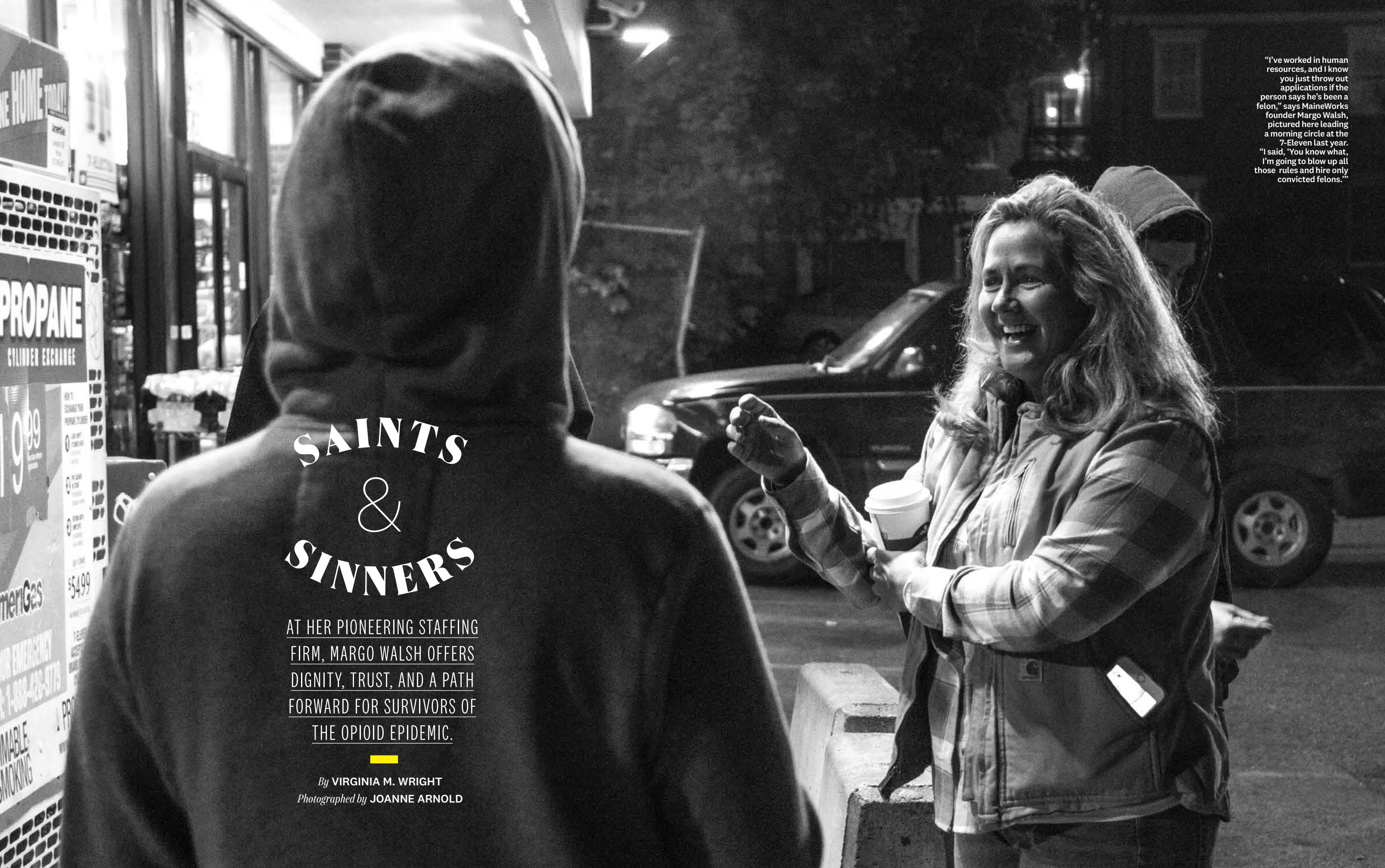


"I've worked in human resources, and I know you just throw out applications if the person says he's been a felon," says MaineWorks founder Margo Walsh, pictured here leading a morning circle at the 7-Eleven last year.

"I said, 'You know what, I'm going to blow up all those rules and hire only convicted felons.'"



# Saints & Sinners

AT HER PIONEERING STAFFING FIRM, MARGO WALSH OFFERS DIGNITY, TRUST, AND A PATH FORWARD FOR SURVIVORS OF THE OPIOID EPIDEMIC.

By VIRGINIA M. WRIGHT

Photographed by JOANNE ARNOLD

**M**ARGO WALSH'S SANCTUARY is a minivan filled with recovering addicts and ex-cons. On this sunny afternoon, she's driving three such men from a construction site in Portland to their sober-living houses across town. She glances in the rearview mirror at her passengers, who also happen to be her employees.

"I don't mean to favor Tristan," she begins, "but he's been through a hot mess. This is his first week here, and he hit the ground running — right out of Maine State Prison. The big house. So, Tristan, would you mind telling us what your deal is? Give us the *Reader's Digest* version of you."

Tristan is 22, with lovelorn blue eyes, a jaw like an ax blade, and six years in jail hanging over him if he screws up his probation for three burglary convictions. He did the break-ins to get money for drugs, and he did the drugs to cope with his chronic anxiety. "They make me feel normal," he confides.

Tristan was 12 when he took his first Xanax, an anti-anxiety drug that wasn't prescribed for him. He was a smart kid who didn't take school seriously, and he'd been placed in alternative education, "which is basically for troublemakers." Classmates teased him for having curly hair and an uncommon name (at his request, we're using a pseudonym). "For a long time, I just took it, but when I got older, I became confrontational," he says. "I got expelled for fighting and drugs. My parents put me in a residential treatment program, and I got kicked out for being an asshole. I started breaking into houses. I turned 18, and I've essentially been in jail ever since."

Now he works for Walsh, the 53-year-old founder of MaineWorks, a temporary-employment agency that supplies labor to landscaping, construction, and road projects. She oversees a 60-person workforce made up entirely of people in recovery, many of them felons, and she's heard hundreds of harrowing stories in her eight years of driving workers to and from job sites. "Tristan, this is your beginning," she says. "It's all about starting now. It's not about recovering anything, because what the f— do you have to recover? Memories of eighth grade?"

When Tristan suggests his feelings of alienation began at age 7, after his parents divorced, his seatmate, Larry, pipes up. "I know what it was for me," he says, "my father's death from alcoholism when I was 16." Chris chimes in from the rear seat, "In my house, it was mental illness. My mother was bipolar. Sometimes she wouldn't come out of her room, and when she finally did, she was on a manic high."

In the intimate confines of Walsh's car, the stories unfurl, because everyone here — Walsh included — has one. And now, they're all writing something new.

## "THIS IS YOUR BEGINNING. IT'S ALL ABOUT STARTING NOW. IT'S NOT ABOUT RECOVERING ANYTHING, BECAUSE WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO RECOVER — MEMORIES OF EIGHTH GRADE?"

Photographer Joanne Arnold's MaineWorks portraits have helped change workers' perceptions of themselves. "They're attractive. They're filled with life. They see themselves and they say, 'Oh, that doesn't match the way I feel about myself or how people treat me,'" Arnold says. "Look at how great they look. There's hope in this brokenness." Pictured at center is Margo Walsh. Her son, Jack Davies, is at bottom right.

**M**argo Walsh's maternal-kickass leadership style may seem at odds with her privileged upbringing in the affluent Portland suburb of Cumberland. During a van tour of MaineWorks job sites around Portland, she explains how both of her parents were doctors, although her mom stayed home "in the traditional, guilt-filled Catholic way" to care for her and her five siblings. It was, she says, "a really lovely family."

But liquor flowed liberally in their home and at neighborhood parties, and as a teenager, Walsh acquired a taste for it. After classes at Waynflete, a private K-12 school in Portland, she and her friends would head to a bar on Commercial Street, where they were never carded. "In the '70s and '80s, it wasn't unusual for kids to smoke and drink," she recounts, "and I drank like a fish."

In her 20s, she worked in New York, recruiting talent for the multinational investment bank Goldman Sachs. She was an enthusiastic social drinker. "I was drinking a ton of wine. My friends and I used to joke that a bottle of wine is per person — it's only four big glasses, right?" She laughs, and the smile reaches up to crinkle her hazel eyes.

Outdoorsy and athletic, she looked great, which helped mask her addiction, but her control slipped in her early 30s, after her mother became ill with a fatal disease. By then married and the mother of a toddler, she began drinking more heavily. She experienced blackouts. Her relationships suffered. She found her rock bottom after her sister gave her an ultimatum — quit drinking or cut all communications. Walsh entered a 10-day alcohol rehabilitation program and spent Christmas morning alone, in a hospital johnny, gazing gloomily at an impenetrably gray sky. Unexpectedly, a shaft of light broke through the clouds, and a feeling of peace washed over her. That was 21 years ago, and she hasn't had a drink since.

A few years later, the family moved back to the Portland suburbs so she could care for her ailing father. She and her husband divorced, and Walsh juggled a job as a fitness instructor with raising their two boys. In the evenings, she gave talks about recovery at the Cumberland County Jail pre-release center, which is populated by inmates who are permitted to work in the community. They told her about their low-paying, dead-end jobs and how lack of transportation limited their options. Yearning for more challenging work herself, Walsh got the jail's blessing to find them better jobs. She drove around greater Portland and knocked on the doors of construction-site trailers, leveraging any connection to the owner she might have — former classmate, friend of a friend, her kids' friends' parents, even her sister's college roommate. MaineWorks was born.

"My mother is fearless," says Jack Davies, Margo Walsh's older son, who joins us at a construction site where Walsh has stopped to pitch a subcontractor on what MaineWorks has to offer. Watching from the van, the 25-year-old says admiringly, "She's a networker. I've got a lot to learn from her."

Davies is one of MaineWorks' original employees. When he was in high school, he'd get up at 4 A.M. to ferry workers to a 7-Eleven parking lot on Congress





Street, where Walsh used to hold "morning circle." That's the daily ritual for handing out job assignments, introducing newcomers, and sharing personal updates, like who's finally getting to see his kids or who's having trouble paying rent. Now, Davies is back, with a degree in finance, looking to use his skills to develop programs for MaineWorks' nonprofit affiliate, the Maine Recovery Fund. Headed by Walsh's sister, Elaine Walsh Carney, the fund assists people reentering the workforce with essentials like housing, transportation, healthcare, work clothes and gear, without which they might derail.

"I love the power of this place to change the lives of people in the most difficult situations," Davies says. "There's some magic to it, where everyone feels they can be open about their past. They'll say more to my mom about what they're dealing with than they will to anyone else in their lives. It's easy to trust her. She has no ulterior motive. She just likes doing this."

A former corporate recruiter, Walsh describes herself as an incurable "hustler" who tries to connect people with each other. "It's always, 'You should be over there' and 'You need to meet that guy,' and I'm going to go to that company and hustle you in right there. That's just what I do."

MaineWorks is the middleman between construction companies looking for temporary labor and a vulnerable population that's eager to work. The companies hire MaineWorks; MaineWorks hires and assumes all the responsibility and risk for the workers, most of whom are new to recovery and often just out of jail.

The model appears to be working. Since MaineWorks' founding in 2011, revenues have increased tenfold, from \$250,000 to \$2.5 million. Last year, it started its own property-management service, offering mowing, plowing, mulching, and the like to businesses and homeowners. Though the expectation is that workers will transition to other employment, some choose to stay at MaineWorks. After 1,000 hires, Walsh says she's had few serious incidents — a handful of falsified timecards and one stolen MaineWorks van.

The first person newcomers encounter at the



**SHE DROVE AROUND GREATER PORTLAND AND KNOCKED ON THE DOORS OF CONSTRUCTION-SITE TRAILERS, LEVERAGING WHATEVER CONNECTION TO THE OWNER SHE HAD.**

company's Forest Avenue headquarters is field operations manager Cecil Solaguren. He handles the paperwork, which is about the only thing the hiring process has in common with MaineWorks' competitors — the temporary-staffing companies, where men and women line up each morning in hopes of getting an assignment and a paycheck at the end of the day, and where they're out of luck if they don't have the required equipment, like work boots. By contrast, MaineWorks puts its workers on the payroll, so they get a weekly paycheck (the pay range is \$12 to \$20 per hour), and they can collect unemployment in the offseason, when the workforce drops by more than half. Solaguren hands out boots, work gloves, and outerwear for those who need them. If they're short on money, which they often are, he gives them a \$25 to \$50 Walmart gift card so they can buy toiletries.

He also offers encouragement, which rings true because Solaguren himself first reported to MaineWorks two years ago, when he was just one day out of detox for a heroin addiction. A college-educated former HR manager for a national retail chain, Solaguren was 18 when he was prescribed the painkiller Percocet for a broken collarbone. "This was back when they were just handing out pills: 'It still hurts? Here's 60 more,'" recounts Solaguren, now 32. At first, it was his weekend party drug, crushed to enhance the high, but in time it

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became a daily need. "Somewhere around age 28, when pills became hard to find, I switched over to heroin. I went from \$50 to \$60 a day to \$300 to \$400 a day. Stealing shit became no big deal, whatever I had to do to get by — locking the door and turning off the lights to avoid the landlord, moving my car around so it wouldn't get repoed. The weird thing is, it wasn't until the day that I was out of money and out of drugs that I saw it was a problem."

His mother drove him from his home in New Hampshire to the first detox facility that would take him, Milestone Recovery in Portland, where he spent seven days. When he got out, he had just enough money to buy a pack of cigarettes and pay his way into a sober house, where the manager handed him a business card for MaineWorks operations manager Mike Trusas.

Trusas gave him muck boots and work gloves and sent him to work for a concrete company. Secretly, Solaguren hated the work, but he showed up every day and did it without complaint. Meanwhile, he was applying for dozens of jobs, anything to get out of doing concrete, but nothing panned out. "There must have been a plan for me, because I ended up staying here. This is what I'm meant to do," he believes. "Margo and Mike saved my life. They always made sure I had everything I needed. They kept me close. They kept me striving to have a higher purpose than rock bottom."

The opioid epidemic was just a whisper in Maine when Margo Walsh started her company. Today, drugs are almost always at the root of whatever trouble her employees have been in, be they recent high-school grads with little to no work experience or former lawyers from high-powered city firms. Many, like Cecil

Solaguren, got hooked after being prescribed an opioid for pain, though from what Walsh has observed, the slow advance of his addiction was unusual. "Alcoholism is like a house full of termites," she likes to say. "It's corrosive. You can kind of put a fresh coat of paint on and it'll look great for a while, but it's going to fall down over time. But this drug addiction — it's like a house on fire."

Even after rehab, addiction can be like the mythical Sirens on their deadly isle, beckoning in times of stress, sadness, or temptation. It's not unusual to show up at the morning circle and notice that someone is missing. "A flag goes up in our hearts immediately," says Joanne Arnold, a documentary photographer who's at the gathering every day, always with her camera in hand and a basket of freshly baked muffins for the crew. "The first question is, are they alive? Often, they're not. Or they're in the throes of a relapse. But here's a place where people come back after falling prey to their addiction, and they will not be judged for it, though they must show the incentive to recover. It's not a social service."

An ordained interfaith chaplain, Arnold is trained to accept people without judgment, or as she puts it, "to meet them where they are." Intrigued by the notion of a for-profit business that appeared to operate on the same principle, she reached out to Walsh two years ago and volunteered her services as a photographer.

Her memory of her first circle is vivid: Shoulders hunched, cigarette smoke rising from the hoods that hid their faces, men drifted out of the pre-dawn darkness into the cold, artificial light of a 7-Eleven parking lot and gathered around the open tailgate of Walsh's pickup. "It felt like a collection of saints and sinners with enormous pain on their shoulders, and yet they were showing up," she says. "I was astonished by the rapport Margo had

>CONTINUED ON PAGE 126



When there are more workers than jobs, MaineWorks often puts people to work making picnic tables for sale. "It gives them something to do, and they learn to cut wood and troubleshoot," Walsh says.



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with a population most people would dismiss, because you see them and you go, 'Am I gonna get out alive?'

Later that morning, she rode with Walsh as she drove workers to their job sites. "They were extremely funny, kind, and generous, even as they talked about how incapable they were of the simplest things, like paying their bills or getting a place to live. I was given a front row seat to the population most authentically expert on the opioid epidemic, and for once, no one was on a pulpit being righteous about a proper path. Instead, there was Margo saying, 'There is a path, and your path is different from George's because he's trying to reconnect with his wife, and it's different from Sally's because she has children, but we'll meet you and together we'll build a platform you can launch from.' Margo's a friggin' pioneer. She's the ballsiest woman I know."

Arnold has attended nearly every circle since, and her portraits of workers, which she posts on her Facebook page, with their permission, have become intertwined with the company culture. "They see how others are seeing them — they look good — and they start to see themselves differently," she explains. The photographs have even spurred estranged family members to reconnect. One woman wrote Arnold, "This is the son I thought I lost."

**I**t's just before 6 A.M. on another bluebird morning, and 20-odd men and one woman are milling around a fire pit in the parking lot behind the MaineWorks building. Margo Walsh, wearing a white peasant shirt and jeans, joins the group and explains the drill for newcomers: stand up, gather 'round, and listen — no need to put out your smokes. Walsh recalls when circle still took place in the 7-Eleven parking lot. "We'd sit in a half circle," she says, "and Mike Trusas would yell at everybody with the directions for the day."

"A lot of 'f—s!'" one man teases, prompting Walsh to demonstrate: "F—this, f— that, f— off!" Everyone laughs.

Walsh asks how many people have messed up their lives with drugs or alcohol, and all hands go up. "Okay, that's a unifier," she says. She asks how

many people have spent time in prison or jail, and most hands go up. "That's another unifier. What MaineWorks is seeking, despite all you guys trailing in from whatever hell you're from, is that you're standing here and ready to go to work. This is the moment that you're reminded I'm part of this."

Walsh congratulates Marshall, who's been offered a permanent job by one of MaineWorks' construction clients. The 23-year-old showed up a year ago, after serving time for a drug-fueled assault on his girlfriend. "I was hopeless and depressed," he tells the group. "I had a tracker bracelet. I had no purpose. Now, it's in the past. I worked really hard on myself, and I have a job. I'm happy where I'm at now. It's been a bumpy ride, but it's possible."

Walsh's eyes land on Tristan, who is now four months into his job at MaineWorks. "So, Tristan, how are you doing?"

"Alright. I don't feel good."  
"You don't feel good. Okay."  
"I think it's just a cold."  
"Okay, that's good. How's your sober house?"

"Good."  
The sense of something unsaid hangs heavily in the air for a moment, then Walsh moves on. Twenty minutes later, in her van, Tristan opens up. A week ago, he'd tearfully confessed to Walsh that he'd relapsed. She sent him home and gave him until today to get clean if he wanted to keep his job. He stopped taking Xanax two days ago.

"I feel okay — it's detox," he says.  
"I'm much better than yesterday."

"Did you tell your dad?" Walsh asks.

"I did," he says softly. "I told my mom too. I told them it was a moment of weakness, I guess. I went through a bad breakup and that kind of fueled it."

They talk about the risk he took with six years hanging over him and the trouble he could have caused MaineWorks. Pulling up to a job site, Walsh turns in her seat and looks at him. "Tristan, thank you for your honesty."

"You're the one person I don't need to lie to," he says, and then he steps out of the van and goes to work. ■

Virginia M. Wright is Down East's senior editor. Follow her on Twitter at @VirginiaMWright.

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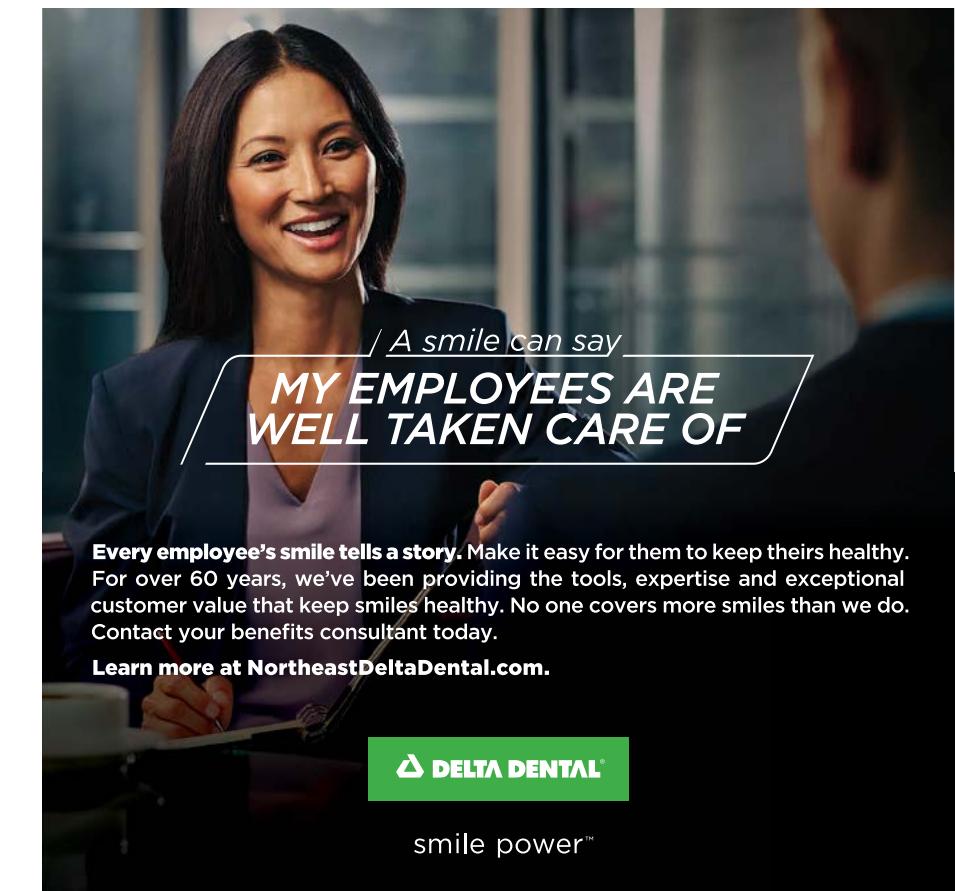
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