We've all been there, a wrong turn, a decision we wished we hadn't made, a life lesson that sometimes is learned the hard way. Many of us are fortunate enough to escape any major or life altering consequences, which is the only thing that separates us from most of the people who find themselves in prison. One definition in the Merriam-Webster online dictionary for "sanctuary" is "a place of refuge and protection". That is exactly the purpose that Wendy Lewen had in mind when she and her family made some major changes in order to found such a place for women, The Sanctuary House.

Wendy's heart for broken women comes from the deep wounds she has fought so hard to overcome in her own life. Wendy is a survivor of abuse. She got through the difficult teenage years which involved drug use and running away.

In an effort to find discipline and structure she joined the army and served three years as an ammunition specialist. And in her early twenties she finally dropped her cocaine addiction immediately, valuing the life of another more than her own. She was going to have a child.
Wendy found much more than just a means of provision while working for a cable company in Southern Indiana. Her boss, also a local pastor even allowed her to bring her daughter to work with her. And not long after Wendy again found herself and her daughter to be homeless as the baby's father didn't like the positive changes Wendy was making in her life. So she did the only thing she knew to do. Wendy knocked on the door of the pastor's home. She was invited in and given a place to stay. Not only that, the pastor's wife offered to babysit for her while she worked and the only payment she sought was that Wendy attend church with them each week. It was the start of a whole new life for Wendy and her child, a stepping stone from a rocky past to a promising future. Wendy met her future husband at the church she was attending and her family life continued to grow and flourish. Today Wendy and her husband have six children and three years ago they were given the opportunity to buy the company Wendy had been working for. She had gone from being a homeless addict to fifteen years later being a wife, mother, and a successful business owner.
Her story is what gives her the burning passion to see other women offered that same chance at redemption. All it took was that one chance she was given to get out of her old life, the chance to not have to return to it. She is adamant that it is "By the grace of God that someone grabbed me and showed me how to be what I am today instead of what I was."
Statics show that the rate of recidivism (former prison residents who return to jail) for women in Clark, Floyd, Harrison, and Washington counties is a staggering 80-90%. Wendy first began to be involved with jail ministry through the Residents Encounter Christ (REC) program. She spent the weekend in jail, this time as a visitor, mentoring women, and she gave a talk on the waywardness of her former life. That was over seven years ago. Wendy found help and healing for herself from a program called SOAR , Survivors of Abuse Restored. She learned that 90% of incarcerated women have been sexually abused. Wendy started a SOAR program

and support group at the Clark County jail and has had that program in place now for over four years. Many women have been helped through the SOAR program.
And it doesn't stop there, Wendy also took a position as a volunteer chaplain at the Clark County jail a couple of years ago. There are currently over 90 women in Clark County jail, and in Wendy's role as chaplain she gets to interact with them on a whole other level. Wendy is allowed to not only go into the prison but into the individual cells or pods where their day to day lives take place. Jail is a tricky thing according to Wendy. She said that once seen as a means of rehabilitation, it rarely offers that due to a frequent lack of funding for programs so much of the time there are no programs that could offer any kind of change or hope.
And then came another issue for Wendy. Sure she can minister to the women in jail, she could give them a whole new perspective on their situation and their future, but what would they do when their time was up and they were released? After all of the mentoring and talk of life change, what was offered to help them implement it and see it through? There are a few places that offer a next step of some kind. Haven House in Jeffersonville offers emergency and short term only housing. Jacob's Well, also in Jeffersonville offers transitional living as well as educational programs for rehabilitation. Ruth's House located in Evansville, Indiana offers both housing and programs. The Bliss House in Bedford, Indiana offers housing and great programs as well as support. And a newly opened Butterfly Transformation House in Elizabeth offers hope and transition for four Harrison County women. But with a return rate of 80-90% plus new convictions, the need always outweighs the opportunity for change rather than reentry back into the system. This left Wendy in tears one night as she got a call from a resident who had just been released. As is too often the case, she had nowhere to go. So as she usually did Wendy offered her own home, a couch for a night or two but that was all she really could offer after all the hope they had discussed prior to her release. Wendy and some friends sat sobbing that night wondering what they could do to bring about actual change in these women's lives. It was then that the dream for The Sanctuary House was born.
It was the next logical step in Wendy's prison ministry, but what a huge undertaking. She is already a wife, mother of six, business owner, chaplain, and serves in many other ministry roles. But she says it is the only way to facilitate real change. Wendy said she was just so tired of not being able to offer more to women who desperately and truly wanted to change their lives but didn't know how to go about it. Wendy began to do research and to talk with the founders of the other transition homes to see how her goal could be accomplished. First she needed the home itself. For that she and her husband moved out of their family home so that it could be used as The Sanctuary House. Next came some fundraising efforts and the unpredictable process, the hope of reclassification by the zoning board. Wendy felt confident about the reclassification going into the meeting and said that if they were turned down then it may not be that particular house that is meant to house the women. With the first hurdle down, a YES to the zoning reclassification, it's now full steam ahead to make the goal and dream a reality.
Wendy's life experiences as well as her extensive prison ministry work makes her well aware of how difficult it can be to take hold of real life change and the life skills that have to be taught and put in place to bring it about. So The Sanctuary House will not just be a bed for the night and a few hot meals. Wendy's vision is for it to house women who have chosen to be there, not just court-ordered more time to serve but women who will sign an agreement committing to programs, classes, and a strict schedule with the payoff being to regain not just freedom or even a temporary freedom, but to gain a better life than they ever imagined possible for themselves. The life they truly each deserve. The hope is to give them the tools necessary to

achieve it.
So the next phase of action is support, both financial and volunteers. There will be one full time "house mom" who will be there 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In addition, there is a need for volunteers to facilitate classes, Bible studies, life skills training. And of course funding will be needed. This is where the community has the opportunity to get involved - anyone with a heart for outreach, women's ministry, or just the desire to see a fellow human being thrive. So whether you have many hours a week you can contribute or just an hour or two, The Sanctuary House is a more than worthy cause for so many reasons. Wendy said that she is grateful for the programs out there for men's recovery but she said her heart and her calling is to helping women. A big part of that she said is the lasting effect on not just one life but generations of lives. She said it is the women who most often are left with the sole responsibility for their children. So in changing the mother's life, teaching her life skills and parenting skills, you also are able to have an impact on the innocent children who are also caught up in the situation and most of the time also struggling to survive.
In addition to volunteers, financial support and donations are always a necessity. There will be a Sanctuary House Gala Event on August 3rd. It will be held at a location to be determined in Louisville. The Louisville Crashers will be playing, there will be a silent auction and most of all an exciting night of fundraising and fellowship for this important cause. If you would like to donate items for the silent auction you can contact Wendy at Info@thesanctuaryhouse.org to arrange drop off or pick up. Donations of furniture, bedding, and food (non-perishable at this point) for the house itself would also be greatly appreciated. And of course to offer much needed financial support please go to The Sanctuary House website www.thesanctuaryhouse.org or again send an email to info@thesanctuaryhouse.org. Wendy said The Sanctuary House will be operating on the lowest possible budget. She said in talking with other facilities about their budgets, she feels she can do just as good a job but at a bare minimum cost.
Wendy has already formed partnerships with the Choices for Women resource center who will be helping to train volunteers and offering parenting classes. And she has partnered with Scarlet Hope, a Louisville based organization that ministers to women & men in the adult entertainment industry, another form of a life of captivity.
Wendy said that in addition to the overwhelming need , too many women and too few facilities and programs available to them, another issue she faces is Clark County is that part of the parole agreement is that once released, they cannot leave the state of Indiana. Wendy knows of many excellent programs offered in Kentucky but again, the women are not allowed to go there. She said there are very few exceptions made to that general rule.
The Sanctuary House is just a starting place for Wendy and her family. Her husband, Doug Lewen, and their six children couldn't be more excited about this opportunity. When asked how her children feel about giving so much time up with mommy so that she can help others, Wendy said that her kids love having the women in their home from time to time and they all have the same selfless love for the broken that Wendy and her husband do. Her oldest, now 13 and born with spina bifida, now spends much of her time serving others, cooking meals, or whatever she can do to help out. It is an amazing thing to watch a family give so much to serve others in the hope of giving them better lives. Wendy said that "when women get out of prison the either change or they go back to their old life, but change is nearly impossible unless someone is there to show them how." Again, she knows from her own experience what it meant to have someone reach down and pull her out of the only life she had known. It was just January of

2012 when her husband looked at her and said “we have to open that house”. So in record time they have come this far and the sky is the limit for all they hope to achieve in the lives of broken women and families. They give all the credit to God for advancing His plan for the broken through them and they can’t wait to see all that He will accomplish in the future at The Sanctuary House.