

One day at a time: Branches founder offers a hand up

Michelle Willard, *The Daily News Journal*



Mike and Doris Courtney

(Photo: John A. Gillis/DNJ)

Branches Counseling Center in Murfreesboro was born from one man's struggle with addiction.

"I am a recovering addict with 12 years of sobriety, one day at a time," Founder and Executive Director Dr. Michael Courtney said.

He had had the perfect life from the outside, but he was living a lie as a secret addict while working as a pastor in Florida, Courtney explained.

When the truth was exposed, he almost lost everything from his family to his job, but hitting rock bottom was the push he needed to enter counseling.

After working through his 12 steps, Branches was born in the summer of 2006 and was incorporated on Jan. 1, 2007.

"We started in a borrowed building on Armory Drive in Murfreesboro as a place for recovery groups to meet," he said.

Now it is a faithbased counseling center that offers healing and hope for those struggling with depression, anxiety, addiction and shame, regardless of their ability to pay.

What is the history of Branches Counseling Center?

In the winter of 2003 I was pastoring a great church in Orlando, Florida. I was also active in a secret addiction. After years of living with this lie, my wife left



Meet Dr. C. Michael Courtney

JOB TITLE

Founder and Executive Director

COMPANY NAME

Branches Counseling Center

CONTACT INFORMATION

615-904-7170

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www.branchesblog.com

ADDRESSES

1450 Battleground Dr., Murfreesboro, TN

Additional offices in Lebanon, TN,
Springfield, TN and St. Augustine, FL

TIME IN CURRENT POSITION

Since 2006

Age

60

EDUCATION

PhD in Clinical Psychology from
Cornerstone University, MA in Theology
from Trevecca University, BA in Religion
from Trevecca University.

Career/Experience: I was a pastor/
minister for over 20 years before starting
Branches in 2006.

me. The truth came out and I lost my church, my career, my family and my future. And it was the best thing that ever happened to me.

I finally admitted my disease and as the 12 Steps say, acknowledged that I was powerless over my addiction. I went to a clinic in Scottsdale, Arizona, and started on a lifelong journey of recovery.

My wife Doris and I were separated for nearly a year, but eventually God brought us back together, restored our marriage and our family, and today we are happier

(and healthier) than we have ever been.

A couple of years later I wrote a book called "Failure and How I Achieved It." Soon after the book came out Doris and I began to be inundated with calls from people asking if they could come talk to us about their own marriage issues, their depression and their addictions.

In 2006, God laid it on our hearts to begin a counseling center where people could find help from depression, anxiety and addiction, regardless of their ability to pay.

Branches was born in the summer of 2006 and was incorporated on Jan. 1, 2007. We started in a borrowed building on Armory Drive in Murfreesboro as a place for recovery groups to meet.

The need of quality, faithbased counseling was at the heart of the Branches dream and God very quickly began to bring together gifted therapists with a heart for God and for others.

The staff at first consisted of myself Mike Courtney, our founder, and Tracey Robison, a licensed professional counselor who serves as the clinical director today. From those days we have grown to more than a dozen counselors. We believe in a partnership between state licensed therapists and pastoral counselors. We now have offices in two states, three in Tennessee — Lebanon, Springfield and Murfreesboro — and one in St. Augustine, Florida. We see nearly 800 client hours each month. Our objective is that no client would ever be turned away because of finances.

We are a nonprofit organization that relies on donations from area businesses and churches as well as individuals to make up the difference in received client fees and actual expenses.

We have a committed board of directors that are all community leaders in their own right. Our current board members are Dr. David McKnight, Dr.

Walter Chitwood, attorney Clifton Sobel, attorney Michael Ward, Marci Richmond, Brenda Wunder, Doris Courtney, Robert Collier and Bob Schwarz.

What does Branches do? Who benefits most from the counseling center?

Branches has three primary functions. On a day to day basis we provide emotional and mental health counseling to dozens of clients from the Middle Tennessee area and beyond. We address issues such as marriage and family, depression, anxiety, anger management and addictions.

While our background is faith based, we see clients from all faith perspectives. We see children as young as 4 years old and work with octogenarians with things like grieving issues and end of life decisions.

We also offer weeklong "Intensives." The Intensive program brings several clients together, usually from across the nation, for very focused and extensive care. A typical Intensive week consists of 12 hours of individual counseling for each client, 12 hours of support group, 12 hours of therapeutic group, 2 EMDR sessions, discipleship, chapel, and innerhealing prayer. Intensives hours are 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Thursday and 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. Friday. We offer an Intensive the third full week of every month.

Finally, Branches seeks to be proactive in bringing good mental and behavioral health and health care to the community and to our churches.

We offer marriage retreats, employee enhancement programs, special interest support groups such as a codependency group and parenting classes.

We also offer a two year training program for pastoral counselors called New Life University. The goal of NLU is to equip churches with welltrained, gifted caregivers that can serve as elementary counselors and referral agents inside congregations. Last weekend, July 18-

19, 2014, we offered a class on Suicide Intervention led by our clinical director, Tracey Robison. The class will equip youth workers, teachers and care givers to recognize the warning signs from those considering selfharm and take appropriate preventive steps.

While there are several wonderful counseling centers and counselors in Murfreesboro, we believe we are a special benefit to those seeking help with a distinctively Christian view and also to those who cannot otherwise afford care.

What is your proudest achievement at Branches?

Several years ago I got a phone call from a young pastor's wife. Her family was in terrible crisis and it looked like the marriage would not survive. The pastor husband was forced to leave his church, the couple was hanging on by a thread, lots of hurt and anger.

They came in and we began the long, arduous process of recovery. We spent two years together at first a couple of times a week and gradually less.

They were faithful, worked hard at healing the marriage. God was faithful. A while back I was asked to speak on a Sunday morning at the church that they now pastor together. That was one of my proudest moments. There have been dozens of stories like that.

What does the future hold for the counseling center?

Our mission has always been to make quality, faithbased counseling accessible to as many people as possible. At first that seemed to be about finances. Now it seems we are having opportunities to be geographically more accessible. We are refining a model of partnering with churches in rural areas to place a team of counselors in communities that would benefit from such accessibility. We are talking to two communities in Kentucky and another church here in Middle Tennessee.

We also plan to expand New Life University to include training in Christian

Life Coaching and a mentoring/discipleship tract. Next month we are offering a class on Thursday evenings called Purpose, Passion and Planning. It is to teach people to discover their own gifts and niches in ministry and in life and to help them teach others to do so. Readers could find out more about that by calling Branches at 615-904-7170 or going online at branchescounselingcenter.com

Anything you'd like to add?

Our base has always been inside the faith community.

I speak frequently at churches and civic groups telling the Branches story and emphasizing the need for emotional health in our families, our churches and our workplaces.

Every other year we host a community wide event called Simply Free. It is a Friday night and Saturday worship conference that features ordinary people telling their stories of deliverance and recovery from traumatic life events, depression, sickness and shame. We have heard from pastors, community leaders, doctors and housewives about overcoming. I believe people go away empowered and confident that they can get through the crisis in front of them.

This year Simply Free will be Nov. 7-8, 2014, at the Family Worship Center on Memorial Blvd., in Murfreesboro. Tickets are free but they are required. You can reserve them by calling Branches at 615-904-7170.



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