

## Part 1: My Story

Where to start? Well I suppose I should start from the beginning...

Well I grew up with the most normal childhood. My family was riddled with addiction and poverty. At the time, the day to day happenings seemed to be normal. I struggled to make it to school every day, which then led to me falling behind of my peers. This then led to an extreme lack of self-confidence. Growing up we don't realize how "not in control" of things we are, we just go on, living what seems to be a normal life. I did not know at the time that addiction, violence, low self-esteem, and a lack of good friends was out of the "norm". So, into my teen years I began to truly mimic the things I grew up believing were normal.

Dabbling in bad relationships, poor decision making, and drugs had begun for me. This was the normal at which I grew so accustomed to. At this point I began to develop what I thought were "friends". Other misfit children who also believed in the same "normal" that I did. All in all, this type of behavior all felt very normal for me... comfortable is more the word for it. And as I grew more comfortable in these behaviors, people, and decisions they all grew bigger. Soon my ability to see the world for what it could be faded. I spiraled and fell deeper into all the previously mentioned things. Soon I found myself becoming an "adult" and the consequences of my actions becoming more and more severe.

As soon as I turned 18 I found myself behind bars. Not knowing at the time what got me there was out of the "norm". Oddly this too felt very normal. I found that I already knew most of the inmates who shared the same room with me. Each just as lost, if not more, as I was. I made more connections within the walls of that county jail. I remember when I left that place for the 1<sup>st</sup> time I felt like I was invincible. Obviously, it did not do me any good. I often found myself visiting that same place. With each visit the charges that the county had against me grew bigger and more extreme. Outside of jail, the drugs I used became the only thing I could think about. Eventually I couldn't even open my mouth without expressing the desire to use and the only "intelligent" discussions held with me were about ways I could get more. I soon lost the ability to be a human being. I was only a drug addict. I was the person that parents warned their children about. I was the person who broke into the corner store that you read about in the paper. If you've ever had your child's bike stolen from your yard, your wallet stolen from your car, or woke up to find your rims gone, that was me. I was THAT person.

Finally, I was busted and picked up my first felony charge. I will be honest here, I was charged with possession of methamphetamine, along with a slew of other minor charges. I believe all in all, that day, I picked up a total of 5 charges ALL related to drugs. This was the beginning of my life turning around. Now we aren't there yet, but very close, so bear with me. While sitting in the county jail, for the longest stretch of time that I had done yet, I began to get a clear mind. I started to detox and surely got stir-crazy. I just needed to walk through a doorway! I didn't care I just needed to go SOMEWHERE! So I began going to rec, the library, AA meeting where also available on a regular basis, and chapel. Now I did not believe in much, aside from drugs. So attending things like self help meetings, and chapel where just for something to do. Now I can see that's where the seed was planted.

I left county jail yet again to find that I am now a convicted felon. The world viewed me different now. Though I was the same person from before I went to jail that last time. So I did not change anything I was doing. At this point I was extremely strung out. Weighing in at only 120lbs, with a terrible attitude and no sense of self. I lived in a filthy 20ft trailer with 5 other "adults" and 6 dogs. It was disgusting, and

for once in my life this did NOT feel normal. This was NOT comfortable, and this was NOT where I wanted to be. At this time, I had no idea how to get out of this situation. I had never been introduced to any other way of living and I could NOT stop using drugs. I know for some this may be a difficult concept to grasp. Some may be thinking “just don’t use drugs, its that simple”, but please try to understand that drugs where as important to me as breathing. Imagine if you can, drowning. Unable to take a breath, that anxiety, that basic survival instinct to fight for some oxygen. That’s what being in the grip of addiction feels like every day. This overwhelming, all consuming power that drugs had over me was leaving me with no choices... I continued to use. Eventually I found myself with my second felony. This time the judge was truly fed up. I had been the cause of so much chaos in my community, and my community was done with me. While sitting in jail, yet again, waiting to hear how long I would be going to prison I got a clear mind. I decided that prison would only further these behaviors, just as county jail had. So, I finally asked for help.

This is when my story turned around.

I requested to join a drug court program. Now the judge was leery to even allow me to join. I don’t know if it was the desperation of my voice, or from my families record of drugs and chaos they were attempting to break, but whatever it was that judge allowed me to join. I spent the next year finding myself. If you aren’t familiar with the drug court program I would highly suggest you do some research. During this time, I checked in with a judge every week, I endured some grueling outpatient treatment, I submitted random U.A.’s, I began to work and found out that I am smart enough to obtain my GED. My days were filled with self-help meetings, community service, building relationships with my family, and finding my faith in God through the Salvation Army. Now I want to say that everything was rainbows and butterflies from here on out, and that I became a model citizen, but that would be a lie. Yes, the drugs haven’t been in my life since, yes I went on to build a career and study psychology, yes I got my license back, and became a responsible adult that pays my bills on time but I still make some “not so great choices”.

I had a hard time letting go of the people in my past. Which eventually lead to me becoming pregnant. Life is hard as a single parent. It was clear that the father of my daughter was not going to step up to the plate. I had my daughter 2 days before Christmas that year. Of course, I had built this amazing support system and rekindled the relationship with my mother. I don’t think I could have done it without her. So, with her support I was able to stay home with my brand-new baby girl. This was the most amazing thing that had ever happened to me. Words cannot describe the feeling you get when you become a parent. Now my “norm” was doing everything I can for this tiny human...

It didn’t take long before I knew there was something not quit within the “norm”. I have a solid understanding of what the “norm” is, and what it should look like. I also have the skills and the confidence to know what I can do to keep things in the “norm”. To make a long story short, my daughter is special needs. She has undergone 3 hip surgeries and has overcome so much more. My daughter would not have the life she does if I wouldn’t have asked for help. If I wouldn’t have reached out, if I wouldn’t have made the change, I know that I would either be still sitting in prison, on the streets, or 6 feet under. In the end those are the only things that a life of addiction has to offer.

If you or someone you know is struggling with addiction, I wish I had the magic words. There is no one way that will work for everyone. BUT what I can tell you is, the benefits of getting clean and staying clean or phenomenal. Take it from me.

## Part 2: My Journey

Being a parent is hard. I came into the parenting world as a single mother. I know there are so many women who can relate to this. It seems like its more common than not for a mother to experience this sometime in their lives. Now I may be wrong, I may just live in a different world than some. The reality at which we all live is sometimes different. Being a single parent wasn't any different for me than just being a parent. I hear so much about how being a "single parent" is "harder" than just being a parent. Well when you come into this parenting world already a single parent it doesn't feel any different than just being a regular parent. Thankfully I had it a bit easier than some. When I got pregnant I was a full-time college student, and I worked part time at a tanning salon. Let me tell you, at the time, this was close to the worst news possible. My only thoughts were, "how am I going to finish school with a baby"? I had what seemed like a never-ending swirl of emotions.

I remember sitting on the bathroom floor with about 6 positive pregnancy tests all lined up on my best friend's bathroom counter. My world had ended, or so I thought. I called my mom and I could barely make the words squeak out over the incohesive crying. Of course, my mother was ecstatic! Even sitting in a hospital recovering from a terrible motorcycle accident she was so happy! This was not what I wanted to hear. This was not the kind of support I was looking for. I'm not even sure what I was expecting to hear. Shouting, words of disappointment, or distress were more of what I thought were going to come out. Its in these times we realize, as adults, how important our parents are. My mother was a single mother, she already knew what it would take. She spoke those words to me with 25 years of experience. She had more confidence in my future with this new tiny human than anyone else on this planet. She became my rock. She became the thing that held me together when I just couldn't do it. At that time, I learned what it really meant to have this kind of support.

My mother was there for me every step of the way. She let me move in with her, she gave me so much courage to continue going to school and to continue to work. When I was ready to quit she supported me every step of the way. Not once did she make me feel less than, not once did she tell me that I'm making the wrong choice, not once did she put me down. So, at 8 months pregnant I quit my job, that school quarter ended December 11<sup>th</sup> and my daughter was born December 23<sup>rd</sup>. This was obviously a momentous occasion. She was so perfect, she was so tiny, she was my new purpose. Words can't describe the feelings you get the moment you become a parent. Everything in my life seemed to melt away in that moment and nothing else was relevant. With the support from my mother, her and I left that hospital the next day to bring that tiny human home with us.

Now Ellie was a special little person. Aside from being extremely perfect, she also cried... A lot... I had been told this type of crying was referred to "the period of purple crying". I'm not sure if the hospital made any of you watch the movie about "shaking baby syndrome" but aside from the obvious lesson in that movie, it also had good information about this so called "period of purple crying". Anyways, Ellie would begin crying (well it was more like screaming bloody murder) from sometime around 3PM till around 6-7AM every day. There were days that my mother would come home from work to find me holding a tiny screaming Ellie, just to find that I had been crying along with her. We were two peas in a pod. She was crying, I was crying, all was right in the world.

Around the time that Ellie grew beyond this stage, I noticed she was falling behind with her milestones. Things like gaining weight, rolling over, and using her hands were not coming at an appropriate time or rate. Ok, Ill be a bit more honest, I did not notice nearly as much as my mother did. I'm telling you, this

woman knows some things about some stuff! Anyways, I spoke with Ellie's doctor, and become connected with the Birth to Three Program. If you don't know what this program is well let me tell you. Because I feel like this is something all parents should know about before ever having children. The Birth to 3 Program is a federally-mandated Early Intervention program to support families of children with developmental delays or disabilities under the age of three. At 6 months old, Ellie began receiving services right away. What I mean by this, for those who don't speak medical-parent lingo, services she was provided included physical therapy, occupational therapy, and later speech. The almost immediate journey for these therapies is hard. You go in front of a board of professionals that sit there to discuss all the things your child can't do. All the things that your child is expected to do, and essentially telling you that your child is not "normal". Let me tell you something, that term "normal" is a big trigger word for me. So, I just want everyone who is reading this to understand, "normal" is a term used to describe your children, "normal" is a real thing in our culture, and if your child does not fall under what is considered "normal" people will tell you about it. There is a silver lining to this term though, so bear with me. Because my daughter did not fall into the "normal" percentage in many areas of the important areas (gross motor, fine motor, speech, cognitive), she was able to quickly be evaluated, and start on therapies. This program has done amazing things with my daughter while she was young. AND they were always there for me to answer all questions.

During this time my little cousin, who was being raised in the same chaos as I had been, ended up in a tight position. The chaos was about to leave him in the custody of the state. Now I'm not sure if any of you know, but the state steps in when a child has been abused or neglected. This only happens AFTER there has been attempts in "rehabilitating" the parent. In this case, the "parent" did not want to make any changes necessary to provide her children in a better life. So, I stepped in and offered my help. I of course had strict limitations. Well limitations that were in the "norm". This included things like "having the right to put him in school" and "taking him to a doctor". Which were minimum to say the least. My cousin being 17 years younger than me was an amazingly strong little dude. Coming to my home he was extremely angry. Angry at the world, angry with his mother, just angry. He had the right to be! We struggled at 1<sup>st</sup>. He was not used to having any kind of structure, he didn't like having a bed-time, and he was extremely academically behind of his peers. Let me tell you what, I've never related more to someone than I do my cousin. I've been there, I've done that, I'm certainly not going to pretend that I know what he is feeling or what he is thinking, because we are 1 different people. All I can do is sympathize, and parent. I mean REAL parenting. None of this, baking cookies, and doing sleep-overs kind of parenting. I mean doing everything I can to help him. Help him catch up academically, help him with his self-esteem to calm his anger, help him to understand that none of this is his fault. So now I am advocating for my daughter, fighting for a better future for my cousin, while trying to be an active participant in my mother's home.... Our home

As Ellie grew a bit more she was not making very much progress in her therapies. We just barely inched by with new skills and milestones. It seemed like there HAD to be a reason why she was not catching up with her peers. I can't stress how important it is to advocate for your child. So many of us, knowing our medical limitations, tend to take what the drs or therapists say. Let me tell you, NO ONE knows your child more than you do. There is not a Dr., surgeon, therapist, priest, or anyone else that knows your child more than you do. If at anytime you think there is something not right, it is your right and duty as a parent to advocate for your little humans.

After speaking with Ellie's doctor, I suggested we investigate genetic testing. Genetic testing is a type of medical test that identifies changes in chromosomes, genes, or proteins. The results of a genetic test can confirm or rule out a suspected genetic condition. I just knew in my heart of hearts that SOMETHING was not right with my daughter. That was certainly out of the "norm". During this time my daughter undergone several tests, she was seen by many different doctors, and we found an answer. Well we got a whole slew of answers. One of which being something the doctor notices physically. Ellie was using her legs weird. That is the best way I can describe it. We did an X-ray and found out that Ellie had DDH hip dysplasia, both sides. Shortly after that diagnosis, we received the results of her final genetics test. Now I was ready to fight for my daughter. I was ready to stand up for her to make sure she would get the best treatment from the best doctors in the world. What I was about to hear, I was not ready for.

Ellie was diagnosed with a non-curable neurological syndrome, better known as ADNP syndrome. Nothing can prepare you on "diagnosis day". The day you find out that the most important thing to you has something that is not curable. The day you are no longer just a parent, or in my case a single parent. The day I officially became a special needs parent. I choose to lump this into a category all its own. Being a parent, and being a single parent is not too different. As a single parent I just had to step up more often, I just didn't get as often as a break away as some, and I had to learn tips and tricks to survive the day to day things. As a special need parent, I became someone new, someone different. Ellie on the other hand did not know, and still doesn't know, that she is any different than anyone else. Being a special needs parent had been the hardest thing to figure out. I spent the next year in and out of the hospitals. Ellie underwent 3 hip surgeries, 6 different specialists to make sure Ellie didn't have any other underlying conditions, and a total of 6 months in a full body cast. I'm not sure if any of you have had to try and hold a toddler down to give them medicine, well imagine holding them still for 6 months! That my friend is what we special needs parents call a our daily "norm". Before you start thinking this is super sad, let me tell you about Mary Bridge Children's Hospital. I have never received the kind of specialized care and attention for my daughter and our needs. These doctors, nurses, and even the receptionist are all the most amazing staff I have ever encountered.

The days go on, I've settled into my role as her mom, and my cousin Kyler is doing so much better. Ellie at the age of 3 is finally taking her 1<sup>st</sup> steps, though her condition is still not curable. Kyler has raised his grades to A's and B's and is still working on his anger. I have changed so much too. I met the man of my dreams who doesn't care about the millions of doctor appointments, he cries with me, he laughs with me, he stands up when I can't, and he stepped up as a father. He didn't have a kid previously, but he now has 2. He stepped right into the role of a special needs parent, the parent of a children who weren't his before now. I have never seen a man more loving, more devoted to this blended family of ours.

### **Part 3: My Service**

Coming from a life of addiction into what we see as normal society was a huge journey, but what I found to be my passions within that journey is certainly a story worth telling.

If you share a similar background as I do, "community care" is not a word you hear often. Even if you don't share my same background, this phrase just may not be something you hear about. Maybe in high school you had to do some community service to graduate, or maybe you got into some trouble with the

law and this was issued to you as a form of punishment. Either way, however it is that you know about community service, what I'm about to share will change the stigma of this phrase.

Stop for a moment and close your eyes and think about your town. What are your very first thoughts, the ones that came to your brain before you even finished reading the question. If you live here in Grays Harbor, you may have been thinking of the large amount of homeless people, the dilapidated buildings downtown, maybe your thinking about the schools and parks. Whatever it is you are thinking of, I'm going to tell you right now that you can make them better. Even if you weren't thinking of the negative things in our community, there is ALWAYS a way YOU can give back and make a difference.

As for me, the service in our community is the cornerstone of what inspires me to get up each morning (aside from my bladder). When I look around in my community I see not just the homelessness, addiction, run-down old building, but I also see the schools that my children go to, I see the parks I take them to when its nice out, I see so much. I've taken moment, many moments, to just imagine what the "perfect" community would be like in my head. Then I realize there is so much I can do to help.

I began small, I started as a bell ringer for the Salvation Army. Now granted this was not something I was volunteering to do, but not all community service is volunteer based. Places like the Salvation Army hire people in to help build their community. I'm not sure how many people know exactly what the Army does with the money raised in those Kettles. I can shed a little light on this subject, EVERY cent dropped into those kettles goes back into your local community. Through the many services that the Army provides. For Grays Harbor this includes financial assistance to help keep families and individuals in their homes, to assist single mothers and others in keeping their heat on in the winter. These funds also go back into keep the homeless of our community fed and helping any family that comes in saying they are struggling to keep food in their fridge. The money that goes into these kettles are used to help our community become a better, brighter place, one person at a time.

After that first taste of what being a part of something so big was like, I was hooked! I wanted to do more to help my community, but I wasn't sure what I could do. So, I stuck around the Salvation Army a bit longer. While becoming a Soldier of the Salvation Army, I went on to do training to become a youth leader out of Lewis County. I worked with what we call "high risk youth". Those kids who share a similar background as mine. For some, the church programs and free meals that were provided where their only escape away from the chaos at home. Working with kids of this nature is challenging. There are so many heartbreaking events and stories that come forth from the kids. With the appropriate training I knew when to step in and make that call to CPS, and I knew when it was just appropriate to sit back a listen. This has been one of the most rewarding parts of my journey with service, and yes, I did this on a volunteer basis. I was not paid to do the training, and I was not paid for the countless hours of time I spent planning, organizing, and preparing programs. This kind of service is where my heart rests, but there is more to come. As I grew within myself and within my community, I found there are more ways I can give back. Now the process to be a volunteer through the Salvation Army is at times cumbersome, but totally worth it in the end.

I found myself with the local Salvation Army thrift store. Now yes, this was another paid "job". Its "jobs" like this that mean more to me than what meets the eye. Yes, I did grunt work, yes, I busted my butt getting through some of the grossest garbage to find the one gem of an item that might sell for a couple bucks. What I want to tell you is what happens behind the scenes. What all the blood sweat, and tears brings, the PURPOSE of a Salvation Army Thrift store. These establishments do more than sell used stuff

to other people. These stores are specifically put there to bring support for the communities Salvation Army Social Services. A couple ways the store does that is, providing additional funds towards financial assistance of struggling community members, and to help provide clothing to the less fortunate, as well as to help furnish the homes of those who are making the turn for the better. I may have just been working a low-level grunt position, but I was a part of something so much bigger than myself. That one fact made this “job” the cornerstone of my giving heart.

After joining the Grays Harbor Community, I began looking for more ways this place needed some extra hands. I found myself in a position where I met the fantastic folks of the Grays Harbor United Way and learned about how they help our community. I was going to spout off their mission, but I feel that their “focus” is what will be heard in a louder volume. “Improve children's education from cradle to career, build a healthier community for all, empower independent living, Provide support in times of crisis”. These key points are what this organization focuses on. This is what I want to be a part of, this is how I want to give back. This organization helps in so many areas of our community I can't even name them all. This is more than just one area of focus, this is a community focus. So yes, I will give back through United Way, and I can't even describe the feeling you get when you know that you are a part of something so much bigger than yourself.

**YOUR** community needs YOUR help. There is so much you can do to give back. From advocating for children who cannot speak for themselves in court, to preparing a food box for the less fortunate. Even if its not something you would like to pursue as your career (trust me there isn't much money to be made in a career with non-profits) there are so many ways your local community needs your help. So take a step outside, evaluate your situation, and decide what area is needed the most, and step up to do it.