

“*RIGHTEOUS PEOPLE WHO’VE NEVER WALKED IN OUR SHOES*”

Marie’s Story

Immediately following her interview, she hands me her business card and says, *“If you judged this ‘report’ by its cover you would be missing a great deal of the story. Keep in touch, okay? If this gets published I’d really like to see it, to read it,”* and as she walks away, this simple gesture speaks volumes as to the differences between the Marie of today and the Marie of the past. I realize that I have just finished interviewing a woman whose tenacity rivals that of ***the little engine that could***.



Within moments of first meeting Marie it was obvious I was speaking with someone whose worldly wisdom was almost as apparent as her honesty. *“I learned how to get past the ‘fakeness’ of people from my time on the street,”* she shares, and except for the slight roughness to her voice, it’s difficult to picture the Marie who, for 22 years, abused drugs and alcohol. I didn’t ask which drugs she favored. It didn’t really matter. What mattered was that she recognized the need to break the cycle, the cycle that was modeled in her own childhood. *“I was doing the best I could. I was doing what my mom did to me.”* Now we speak mostly of the last 5 years of her life, the years of her sobriety. The years that brought the return of such concepts as striving for and achieving personal goals. *“Most people on the outside know nothing about me and would never, ever guess.”* Indeed.

The father of Marie’s three children, also an addict, has been in and out of prison. Before his current incarceration, his third, his prior lock-ups were each for a period of three years. During his second stint, Marie made the decision to go into treatment when her mother threatened to take permanent custody of her children. While the children’s father has never returned to their lives, Marie completed a two-year program that included a 6-month stay in residential recovery. Her boys were too old to go into the facility with her and so stayed with their grandmother. Marie was able, however, to take her youngest, her daughter, along. While in treatment, Marie learned about being honest with others and with herself, and she learned about responsibility. *“One day, I’m sure I will give back. That’s one of the reasons I was willing to do this interview. Righteous people who’ve never walked in our shoes don’t understand what it’s like.”* Marie already does give back to her kids, to others in recovery, and perhaps most importantly, to herself.

“I found out about Mothers and Sons when my middle son was 10. I had been sober about 18 months at the time and got to know the Vice-Principal. When my son got into some problems, she offered me the program. It came at the right time for me. I was just finishing up the last 6 months of my treatment, and I wasn’t ready to be done with recovery. I took advantage of the group counseling that Mothers and Sons offered, because I knew what it could do for me. I wanted the commitment.”

It turned out to be a little different than Marie expected. The first time she met with the program staff, he explained that there would be role modeling for her son and that Marie and her son would gain a new understanding of each other, the lines of communication would improve.

“I was under the impression that my kids would get multiple male role models. The (Alliance male staffer) got spread really thin. I don’t blame him, the program just NEEDS MORE MEN. He made commitments and he wasn’t able to keep them, and for so long we’ve had men in our lives who were not there when we needed them. You can try and explain it away, but my kids’ dad did that all the time.” Not to be thwarted, Marie brought it to the attention of one of the Alliance male staff members. *“I opened my mouth and they gave me solutions.”* When she was referred to Big Brothers and Big Sisters, the drawback was similar, however, as the waiting list for a Big Brother turned out to be about 6 months.

What she, herself, gained from her involvement is not to be dismissed, however, and ultimately all of her children have profited. When the first commitment to Mothers and Sons ended after three months, Marie’s group decided that wasn’t long enough. We all went and said, *“Don’t tell us we can’t come anymore. We had all kinds of people to go to. All kinds of support, and we couldn’t get enough.”* Marie found groups that stressed the importance of self-care and focused on her own behaviors in parenting. She also found a great support network in the Parent Empowerment Group (PEG.) *“The women who ran PEG sincerely cared. They completely focused on the way we felt and acknowledged those feelings. We were never judged in any way, shape, or form. They were really well educated, but they really cared. And they knew that recovery includes everything. My goal was to help my child. I didn’t know I was going to learn to help myself.”*

Marie’s story is ultimately one of success. When she first hooked up with Mothers and Sons, she was in her second quarter at a local business college. Her goal was to get an AA degree and get a job. The programs provided the support that she needed to get her through her schooling. She was able to attend school full-time while also regularly attending Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, and Mothers and Sons. She got the AA degree and the job, and is currently employed as a sales representative at a subsidiary of a well-known bank. She’s also currently studying for a test to become a financial consultant.

With her own background of chemical imbalance and chemical depression, Marie was faced with the difficult decision of whether or not to put her son on medication for his depression and ADHD. She ultimately opted for the medication. *“I work a full day now. My son still gets in trouble, it’s still a difficult time, but the difference is now I handle it differently. And I don’t give up.”*

She would further recommend the Mothers and Sons program to anyone who would go. Before switching her sons to a different school, Marie had been out of the program for months and her son, now 16, was too old for Mothers and Sons. She called the Alliance Mothers and Sons Worker and he went out of his way to help. He went to her son’s classes, and pulled the young man aside to talk and to offer support. *“Before we left, I let three Alliance staffers know that I was switching schools. They made it clear that if I needed help at any time, I could come back or they could make referrals.”*

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Marie does not want to forget mentioning the importance of having these services available for free. *“If I had to pay, I couldn’t do it.”* She proudly informs me that at this point in her life she is 2 months off MediCal, she pays her own Kaiser bills, has no food stamps, and is completely financially stable. *“But even if I had to pay an extra \$50, I couldn’t do it. Groups like this let you acknowledge that you’re OK. You look at someone next to you and can say, ‘you did that too?’ My goal is to always keep in touch with something like that.”*

