

From heroin to heroine

Prince of Peace Center program helps ex-addict find her way back

By RENEE CAREY Herald Editor

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RENEE CAREY | Herald Tiffany Runyan and her daughter, Kelsey.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the first in an occasional Herald series about local residents who have changed their lives with the help of the United Way's partner agencies. Look for more stories of hope, second chances and victory from those are benefiting from Mercer Countians' donations to the United Way.

Tiffany Runyan is rising.

She is no longer the addict who fell into the grip of heroin 10 years ago.

She is not the same young woman who lost her home, her job, her car and her children.

She is no longer moving in and out of rehab only to relapse and to end up on the streets again.

She no longer thinks she has nothing left to live for.

Now she is a new mother and a woman with a mission: to keep her life on the right path, to earn back the trust she lost and to put her family back together.

She knows recovery is a journey – and that she still has work to do.

But, she says, she is not going to let the drug that stole nearly a decade of her life the chance to sneak back in.

“If I am going to go, it is not going to be with a needle in my arm,” she said.

She knows now that not only can she make it. She will.

She is, in a word, a survivor.

And, she credits the Ruth Program at the Prince of Peace Center and her daughter Kelsey with saving her life.

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Tiffany was a longtime user who was in and out of rehab, vowing each time that the treatment would stick.

“At 20-21, I started using drugs,” she said. “Two years later, it got pretty heavy.”

She says she would decide she needed help and then seek it, only to slip back again.

“I guess I just was not ready,” she said.

But then she hit bottom.

“I overdosed in 2012,” she said. “I lost my car, my apartment and my kids. I didn’t want to get better. I felt like I did not have anything left to live for.”

Tiffany said she had nowhere to live, had some trouble with the law and lost her insurance.

Without that, there was nowhere to turn.

“I was basically homeless,” she said.

She was living from one high to another.

“That is how I spent my days, waking up, getting high and looking for the next high,” she said.

And then at the end of 2014, Tiffany felt a twinge – the first nudge that perhaps this time the help she sought might make a difference.

And then in January 2015, she found out she was pregnant.

It was then that her world changed.

She knew it was time. She had to get help and mean it – for her baby.

“I was homeless, and I was scared,” she said. “I did not know what I was going to do.”

Tiffany says she told her doctor that she was pregnant and that she was a drug user.

She was referred to Magee-Womens Hospital in Pittsburgh, where she was taken off heroin and put on methadone.

And that is when she found Prince of Peace.

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It was just a random call, one of many Natalie Higbee and her staff at the Family Services Support Center get in a day.

She and Tiffany talked – about her addiction, about her baby and about her future.

And that is when they and her life advocate, Lisa Huffman, set a course for a future without drugs and with the parenting and life skills Tiffany needed.

Tiffany said she learned about the Ruth Project at a Narcotics Anonymous meeting.

It is one of the many programs at the Farrell-based center that are geared to helping people change their lives – and one of the reasons the Prince of Peace Center is one of the agencies that United Way supports.

The program offers single mothers the support, the guidance and the temporary housing they need to get their lives back on track.

Natalie said all it takes to get started is a telephone call, a Facebook message or an email. But what it takes to be successful, she said, is an absolute determination to do the work.

“You have to come in with a full tank of gas,” she said. “You have to keep moving.”

And the help is not a gift, Natalie and Tiffany said.

Participants in any of the center's programs are expected to do the work – and to live up to their responsibilities from paying the small fee to live in the housing to attending workshops, training and counseling sessions.

“We are there for them every step of the way – and would do anything to help them achieve their goals,” Natalie said. “But we expect a lot from them, too.”

Tiffany said the journey is not an easy one.

She has had to settle all legal issues, including paying off fines, and learn how to be a better parent. She also must attend counseling sessions.

And by her side all the way was Lisa – day or night, whenever she needed her.

And that made all the difference, Tiffany said.

“At first, I really did not have anyone to count on,” she said. “I had damaged all those relationships.”

Lisa helped her through those early first steps, even helping her get to meetings with her probation officer.

“Just being able to talk to her and share with her on a daily basis, to have someone there whether I was having an awesome day or a terrible day, it really helped,” Tiffany said.

Counseling has also been a help – as has the monthly support group meetings with those who were going through the same challenges she was.

“The people in my support group, they are unbelievable,” Tiffany said.

The hardest part, however, was earning back the trust of her family.

“What I had put them through, the lying, the stealing, the broken promises, of course, they wouldn't just trust me again,” Tiffany said. “I had to prove to them that it was different this time. I am working hard to regain that trust.”

Tiffany's mother took custody of her two boys, Derek, 8, and Levi, 6.

“I did not fight it,” she said. “I knew that I could not take care of them.”

But part of her future – and the reason she is working so hard at her recovery – is not just to be a great mom for Kelsey, but also to get her boys back home.

“I have taken every bit of help that was offered to me,” Tiffany said.

And now, she is well on the way to rebuilding her relationship with her mom – and is now visiting weekly with her children.

She recently introduced the boys to their new baby sister. It was a heart-warming moment, she added.

“It is a blessing to see them with their little sister. They are so curious about her.”

And one of her proudest achievements, she said, is rebuilding the relationship with her grandmother. Tiffany said stealing from her is how she ended up in jail.

“My grandmother is such a wonderful person,” she said, tears in her eyes. “She is always there for me, even after all I put her through.”

Her family is coming around, too.

Now, Tiffany says, when she comes into their homes, she is welcome.

“It is a gift to me to have that trust again,” she said.

She knows it is an ongoing process, that she has to prove she is serious about her recovery every day.

“I am holding myself accountable,” Tiffany said.

And she has goals.

“I want to get my license back, get a permanent home and then get my children back with me,” she said. “I want my family complete.”

A GED is also in those future plans.

She now sees her life from the other side. She sees addicts now and realizes how close she came to giving away her life.

That choice was made even more poignant when she attended the funeral of a friend who had succumbed to a drug addiction.

“It was kind of bittersweet,” she said. “It was sad – but it wasn’t me, and it is not going to be me.”

And she has a message, too, for those who are struggling with a drug addiction: “Ask for help,” she said. “You cannot do it alone – no one can.”

She said when she first started using, drugs were not readily available here. Now, she said, they can be right next door.

“They are everywhere,” she said. “And that drug does not discriminate. It takes everyone.”

But, she said, she is living proof – you can make it.

“You have to seek out the help, and take it,” she said.

It is a step she is grateful she took every day.

“I used to look in the mirror and I would see the person looking back at me and not realize how bad I looked,” she said. “I look in the mirror now and I see a healthy, happy person looking back.”

And most importantly, Tiffany said, she knows that this is a battle she is going to win – for herself, and her children.

“I am going to make it,” she said. “I am determined.”