

## Written Testimony

My name is Ashley Potts and I currently work for Southwestern Pennsylvania Human Services (SPHS) as a Team Leader for the Crisis Diversion Unit. I am currently pursuing my Master's Degree in Social Work, I have a Bachelor's Degree of Arts, and an Associate's Degree in Science. Before accepting my position at SPHS, I worked for the Washington Drug and Alcohol Commission (WDAC) as a case manager for Washington County's Restrictive Treatment Program, Drug Court, for three years. However, nine years ago my life was completely different. At twenty years old I found myself homeless, addicted to heroin, and suicidal. I was facing a state prison sentence and no one in my family wanted to be around me. Telling you about my history will help you understand the importance of treatment, the impact of stigma, the need to have awareness on preventing addiction, and recovery is possible.

I took my first drink of alcohol when I was nine years old. My mother suffers from addiction issues of her own, so culturally I did not process that it was wrong. When I was twelve years old, I started smoking marijuana and drinking on a more regular basis. At thirteen, I was given my first Oxycontin. This is where my love for prescription pain pills started. I started having behavioral issues in school, getting suspended on a regular basis, receiving multiple fines, and eventually, I was expelled from high school in the ninth grade. This is the first time I thought that maybe I should stop using drugs. I quit abusing cocaine and prescription pain pills; however, I still did not seek treatment or therapy for the issue. I was able to remain abstinent from these substances for the remainder of my ninth grade year.

At the beginning of my sophomore year of high school, I was allowed to return to my old school. Things were going well in the beginning, but eventually I fell back into old habits. This is the year I began using crack. My life started to spiral out of control and I began running away from home. I was apprehended by the police several times, yet I still continued to run away. Eventually, I assumed they were no longer looking for me. I quit going to school and just continued to use drugs. Someone once told me "Ashley if you play with fire long enough, eventually you will get burned." I did not understand what that meant at that moment but later it all made sense. My entire life I was determined never to be a heroin addict, I hated heroin addicts, I was better than them. The price of prescription pills were very expensive. The price for Oxycontin on the street was \$1.00 a milligram; an 80 milligram pill was \$80.00. I could not financially support this habit despite a life of crime, and eventually I gave into heroin; it was only \$10.00 a bag. I was seventeen years old.

After breaking into my father's home and stealing some of his belongings, I was sentenced to juvenile probation for six months. During this time I was ordered to an outpatient program and my probation officer would come to school to visit me. I had moved in with my mother. I was able to graduate from high school despite my drug abuse and lack of attendance. The summer after high school graduation, I was eighteen years old, and I had not spoken to my father in quite some time. I called him repeatedly and told him if he did not pick me up that I was going to kill myself.

My father came to pick me up. I returned to his house and went through the physical withdrawals of heroin. With every agonizing breath I said to myself, "I am never going to use again." At this time, I still had not received any inpatient treatment; therefore, none of my behaviors were changing. After a short time of living there, I found out that I was pregnant and I was able to remain abstinent the duration of my pregnancy. Once I had my daughter Riley, everything changed. I was determined to be the best mom I could be; everything was going to be great.

A few weeks after I had my daughter, I thought I could just drink alcohol. This led to just snorting bags of heroin, which ultimately led to me having a needle in my arm again. Things were worse this time, worse than ever before. I took my daughter and left my father's house. A few weeks later, there was a knock at the door where I was staying with my daughter, it was my father. He begged me to let him have temporary custody of Riley and for me to go to rehab. I agreed. This was the first time I was going to go to an inpatient rehabilitation facility. I remember the car ride there, laying in the back seat, too sick to even sit up, the agonizing pain was back and with every breath I said, "I am never going to use again." The rehabilitation stay was short, only 24 days, even though my family begged them to keep me. I refused a halfway house and returned home; it was May 13<sup>th</sup>. Riley had her first birthday party on May 20<sup>th</sup>, but on May 17<sup>th</sup> I was using, nowhere to be found. All the dreams I had of being the best mother I could be were shattered and enslaved to a needle. My father informed me to never step foot on his property again or I would be arrested.

I was living in my car. I started selling all the things I had that were worth any amount of money: clothes, cell phone, and eventually my car. I had nowhere to stay. I moved in back in with my mother. I began writing fraudulent checks to support my drug habit. I stole my mother's checkbook and wrote fraudulent checks in her name. I broke into an innocent person's home and stole their belongings. I had become the exact thing I hated most in this world. I felt like a zombie, a hollow corpse. My mother had me walked out of her home in handcuffs. Everyone was done with me. I had several warrants out for my arrest and no desire to live anymore. In my head, there were only two options: go to treatment and stop using or kill myself.

I decided to try treatment one more time. Again, going through the physical withdrawals and with every agonizing breath saying, "I am never going to use again." I spent seven long days in a detoxification unit and then 29 days in an inpatient rehabilitation program. The time came again where they offered me a halfway house, this time I said yes. This time I was homeless and had no place to return to. I transitioned to a halfway house in Washington, Pennsylvania; it was October 16, 2006. Making the decision to go to a halfway house was the best decision I had ever made. I spent 216 days in treatment; those were the best days of my life because those 216 days saved my life.

When I arrived at the halfway house, the first thing I did was turn myself into all the municipalities that were searching for me. They told me to stay where I was, and the court process would be started. I listened. For the first time in my life, I listened. While I was there, I was encouraged to participate in the Intensive Vocational Rehabilitation Program (IVRP), a program to assist with job development. I took an I.Q. test and scored at a sixth grade level; I was twenty years old. Several months went by and it was time for me to go to my sentencing court hearing. I had seven months clean at the time and was prepared to face my consequences and go to jail that day. However, when I stood in front of the judge, he granted me 216 days time served and immediate parole. I finally felt like I had a second chance at life and was ready to take full advantage of it. Something happened this day, though; I became a convicted felon.

I returned to Washington and continued with my recovery process. I had decided I wanted to go to college. Due to my low education scores, I first attended Careerlink to take some refresher courses. I enrolled at Community College of Allegheny County (CCAC), I still had to take prerequisite courses; however, I was just so excited to be in college. It was surreal, the girl everyone said couldn't make it, the girl that was told she was not college material. I was in college. I transferred to a technical school as I wanted to pursue a career in the medical field. I attended six hour classes, four days a week. It became time to participate in an internship; however nowhere in Ohio, Pennsylvania, or West Virginia would accept me due to my criminal record. I was forced to quit the program.

This was my first true encounter with stigma. The decisions that I had made during my active addiction would haunt me for the rest of my life. It was a hard internal battle to continue to pursue a college education. I took a year off from school, but then I decided to go back. I returned to CCAC to finish my associate's degree and then I decided to go further. I enrolled at California University to obtain a bachelor's degree. I was sure to select a program that did not require an internship, so I would not have to face that stigma again. I was able to move forward with my career and obtain a job at the Washington Drug and Alcohol Commission. An employee there had vouched for my character due to my record. This had happened several times while employed there. To be able to work with the Restrictive Treatment Program and complete assessments at the jail, the executive director had to speak with people individually and let them know that I was not the person that I had appeared to be on a piece of paper.

While assessing individuals for the Restrictive Treatment Program applications for Medicare/Medicaid would be completed. Most of these individuals were eligible to receive Medicaid to assist with treatment for their addictions. It is important to have policies in place to continue to assist these individuals to gain access to the treatment that they need. It is also important to have policies in place that monitor the distribution prescription pain pills. Speaking from personal experience having easy access to prescription pain pills can have a devastating impact on one's life.

During my three years of employment with WDAC, I had the opportunity to learn about the individuals on the Restrictive Treatment Program and what had led them to the criminal justice system. In some cases their stories began by receiving a "harmless" prescription from their doctor for pain. These scenarios could include a sports injury or even child birth, either way they had the same outcome, drug court. Despite the fact that prescription painkillers are approved by the Food and Drug Administration, it is important to understand that does not make them safe. While working for WDAC, I also learned that medically assisted treatments such as Suboxone were being identified by individuals as a drug of choice rather than a treatment method. The Restrictive Treatment Program had individuals who were utilizing Vivitrol as a medical assisted treatment and they were diligently working to create more specialty tracks to include other medical assisted treatments and address the various issues attached to them.

During my recovery process, I have had several encounters with stigma. My felony convictions have affected every decision I have made from employment, to housing, to schooling. I have not been hired for several positions due to my criminal record: laughed at by landlords when seeking rental properties; and forced out of school. No matter how hard society tried to bring me down, I was determined not to let it. I have spent several years rehabilitating my life and I never gave up on my dreams. I went from testing at a sixth grade education level to being enrolled in graduate school maintaining a 3.8 GPA. I went from being a client in the IVRP to sitting on their Board of Directors. I went from volunteering at the Washington Drug and Alcohol Commission to being an employee. Recently I was promoted within SPS to be a team leader for their crisis diversion unit and join their management team. I have filed for a Governor's Pardon for my felony convictions and have devoted my life to helping others. I am proof that treatment works, I am proof of being a good person with much to offer beyond my history of addiction, and finally, I am proof that recovery does happen.