

A Different Kind of Appetite

BY: ANNA DELLINGER



Michael Holder has tried just about everything the world has to offer. After being introduced to alcohol and marijuana at age 14, he began to crave the taste. Michael spent decades chasing the next high, dealing drugs, committing crimes, and floating around from place to place. He was shot, stabbed, and set on fire. For several years, he lived under a bridge on a diet of vodka and methamphetamine.

“I thought there was no other life for me than the drug life and partying,” Michael said. “I was to the point where I didn’t even care about my life.”

At age 40, Michael caught some charges that would’ve put him in prison for 8-10 years. Those charges, along with nine months in jail as he awaited sentencing, were a turning point in his life.

“It was while I was in jail so long that I developed a relationship with God that I never had before, through prayer and immersing myself in the Bible. God saw fit to reveal to me my purpose,” Michael explained. “He showed me that all the trauma and experience on the streets was so I could help those on that path to death and destruction see that there is a better life for them through Him.”

The judge offered Michael an alternative sentence: an 18-month Drug Court program designed to reform people with criminal backgrounds. Michael gratefully accepted.

While in the program, he started working at UPS and found accountability and a safe, affordable place to live in an Oxford House (recovery home). Through HOPE Community Services, he also heard about the Center for Social Innovation (CFSI) and applied for the program, even though he didn’t think he would cut it since he was a high-school dropout.

CFSI creates avenues for education to men and women overcoming social barriers such as substance abuse, homelessness, and criminal records. The program provides leadership training, life skills, and tuition assistance for classes at OSU-OKC.



“If I hadn’t got in the CFSI program, I never would have completed my drug court program,” Michael said. “I’d probably be either dead or in prison. CFSI helped me learn a new way of life.”

Still, after surviving such a hard, dangerous past, he experienced a bit of culture shock transitioning into a “normal life.” For a year, Michael volunteered 40 hours a week through his internship at Lynn Institute (via CFSI), attended school, and worked nights at UPS. From community outreach events such as zoo walks and food distributions, he encountered a lot of cultural diversity and developed a hunger for serving others.

He graduated from CFSI in May 2023 and graduated from drug court in September 2023. He expects to graduate in 2024 with his associate degree in addiction counseling before moving on to a bachelor’s program at the University of Central Oklahoma.

Now, because of the skills and certifications he gained through CFSI, Michael works at Diversion Hub, a collaborative, multi-agency network that provides life-stabilizing resources and services to individuals navigating the justice system. Michael and one of his fellow CFSI graduates, Lindsay Haley, serve as Court-Ordered Outpatient Navigators; since October, their clients’ compliance rate has gone up from 52 percent to 74 percent.

“I love everything I get to do on a daily basis,” Michael said. “We’re developing relationships and they’re trusting us, and that’s the main thing in helping these people succeed.”

Before CFSI, Michael struggled with a severe social anxiety disorder. But today, Michael can sit down face to face with his clients and have meaningful conversations with people who relate to him.

“I used to be that person. I knew some of these people from the streets. They hardly even recognize me. I tell them, ‘I found God, and I got my life together.’”

With almost two years of sobriety under his belt, Michael is flourishing.

“I prayed day in and day out while I was in jail. I said, ‘God, please take the taste out of my mouth for drugs, women, drinking, the fast life,’” Michael remembered. “He answered my prayer, and He gave me a purpose. He sustains me. I get on my knees every day and thank Him.”