

# The Program Connection

BY: ANNA DELLINGER

Shawna Stephens' life was headed down a painful path before she was even born. Her parents were addicts. When Shawna was 11 months old, she and her two older sisters were adopted by their aunt.

"We had a wonderful childhood," Shawna said. "My aunt did an amazing job raising us. We never wanted for anything. But being the middle child, I always struggled with a sense of belonging."

Her dad was sober by the time Shawna was 12, so she made the decision to live with him and her sisters. Unfortunately, his permissive parenting style allowed his daughters too much freedom.

"By the time I turned 14, I had started my drug addiction," Shawna said. "At first, it was a little bit here and there — weed, and then harder stuff."

His service in the Vietnam War, several types of cancer, and years of drug abuse stole away her dad's health, and finally his life, when Shawna was 16.

"That's when things got hard for me," she said. "I fell deeper into my addiction and dropped out of school. When I turned 18, I had my first baby."

For the next nine years, a pattern of drug abuse, pregnancies, babies taken away, arrests, and depressive episodes plagued Shawna. In 2017, she was arrested for possession of illicit substances. The judge offered her a chance for redemption.

"I got accepted into the Drug Court program, but I wasn't ready to change my life," Shawna remembered.

Instead of sticking to the program, Shawna went AWOL. She was arrested at a routine traffic stop and went to jail. She found herself pregnant once again, and after a relapse, her new son was also taken from her.



When Shawna finally decided to turn her life around and get clean November 4, 2018, she meant it. She had found support through multiple programs, and she was learning new tools to navigate through life. Even when her sister died in a car wreck in 2020, Shawna stayed sober.

With over two years of sobriety under her belt, Shawna began to restore family relationships. But her life transformation didn't stop there. A friend told her about the Center for Social Innovation (CFSI), a program at OSU-OKC designed to give hope to individuals overcoming a wide array of social barriers. CFSI provides financial assistance, training, and certifications to program participants.



"I wouldn't have gone back to school without CFSI," Shawna said. "And the support that CFSI has is amazing ... the community and the people get you because they are just like you. You don't feel judged. It's a community you belong in."

The CFSI program connects students to internships at local nonprofits. Shawna was ecstatic to intern at RestoreOKC, which had helped get her on her feet earlier in her sobriety. She graduated from CFSI in May 2023.

Today, Shawna is able to pay it forward as a Recovery Support Specialist at RestoreOKC, where she works full time. She is also an online student, on track to graduate with her associate degree in addiction counseling. Four of her six children live with Shawna, who now has a house, a car, and stability.

"I have a great support system. Having jumped from program to program to program, I gained tools and community," Shawna explained. "ReMerge, CFSI, RestoreOKC, all the men and women I've met through the programs, [they're] my family."

Nonprofit work is not for people who are in it for themselves; great bonuses or weeks of paid time off are not the norm. Serving others — whether in addiction or homelessness or trauma or inequality — is often emotionally draining and exhausting. But for someone like Shawna, it means everything.

"CFSI changed my life, and I watched my classmates grow and get into a position that has changed their lives dramatically for the better. I think that everybody who wants that chance deserves it."

