

Learning to Heal

BY ANNA DELLINGER

Terrace Garrett's smile lights up any room. His vibrant and outgoing personality make conversation easy, and he's quick to make new friends.

"I walk into a room and know no strangers," he said.

But that wasn't always the case. One trauma after another led Terrace to years of substance abuse, crippling depression, panic attacks, and extreme social anxiety.

He grew up with a workaholic father who became abusive to Terrace's mother. His parents divorced when he was 13.

"I ventured off, trying to find myself in the LGBTQ community," Terrace said. "While doing so, I ended up experimenting in drugs."

His first experience with cocaine led to years of destructive behavior and several stints behind bars. While in prison, Terrace was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma. He was transferred back and forth from the correctional facility to the hospital every other week for chemotherapy.

"I had no family around at the time," he said. "It was just me and God to get me through."

His cancer went into remission, and he finished his prison sentence. However, Terrace wasn't bound for a carefree life.

In 2013, he was shot six times by an intruder in his home. He survived — but not unscathed.

"All the time, I felt like fear was overcoming me," Terrace said. "I was diagnosed with PTSD, anxiety, panic attacks, and severe depression. After the accident, I was really closed off and fearful around certain groups of people."

Instead of finding help, Terrace turned to drugs again to cope.

"I thought, 'I can mask my mental health status by using and still have money left,'" he remembered.

Terrace did more than use, though. He began selling drugs and eventually caught a trafficking case. Fortunately, his public defender started asking questions, trying to get to the root of Terrace's problem.

"I told them, 'I'm tired of being tired. I'm still trying to heal, I just don't know how.'"





After realizing Terrace had a history of mental health problems, the judge offered mental health court. Terrace agreed to the 18-month program.

He got out of jail, moved into a sober living house, and began outpatient treatment. Terrace's house manager told him about the Center for Social Innovation (CFSI) and encouraged him to go back to school. CFSI caters to individuals coming out of situations such as substance abuse, incarceration, and mental health disorders. The program partners with OSU-OKC to offer participants financial assistance, leadership training, certifications, and other resources.

Terrace knew he needed structure and help, and he was determined to get better. He applied for CFSI and went back to school; he also graduated the mental health court program four months early.

"While at CFSI, I gained back a lot of confidence and actually got the support I needed when it comes to family. It's been so long since I had that."

In May 2023, Terrace graduated the CFSI program where he earned his Peer Recovery Support Specialist certification. He expects to graduate with his associate degree in addiction counseling in 2025.

"I never would've thought I'd be where I am today," he said. "If it wasn't for CFSI, more than likely I wouldn't be employed — and I'd probably be back on the drug scene. I would've faked my way through the program at mental health court. I would've felt like the system once again failed me."

Today, Terrace works at Sisu Youth Services, which caters to the young LGBTQ community. He builds relationships with the kids and helps them feel safe and comfortable. Case management workers focus on needs such as homelessness and connect youth to providers that address substance abuse and mental disorders.

The true value of the CFSI program for Terrace came in the form of community. The cohort had all the same classes and graduated together. They continue to meet for lunches and stay connected. When the senior director of CFSI attended a recent ribbon cutting at a new Sisu house, Terrace was moved to tears.

"I got rid of everyone in my circle that was toxic. I'm continuing to build relationships with the people currently in my life. They all want the best for me. ***I want this, and I'm going to succeed.***"

