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Been there & back

Woman credits DCF with helping her kick drugs, get her children back



MICHAEL KABELKA REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

Sha'rone Hamer, with her son Crey'on, said once she accepted reality, she allowed the state Department of Children and Families to give her the help she needed to clean up her life.

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It took 29 years for Sha'rone Hamer to hit rock bottom.

After decades of drugging, the Waterbury resident struggled to put her life back together, only to fail again and again.

After the state took custody of her youngest child, Hamer snatched back her life, left drugs behind and won back her son. Her struggle has made her a role model for state officials trying to show that families fractured by drugs can be reunited.

She began abusing drugs when she was 16. Her addiction carried her from Connecticut to Colorado to Kansas and back to Connecticut.

It brought her in and out of a series of relationships that left her with four children. And it nearly cost her those children.

Hamer managed to keep her three older children out of state custody by placing them with relatives.

But the state Department of Children and Families caught up to her and took custody of her son shortly after his birth.

Hamer said DCF actually helped put her life in order to get her son back permanently.

She didn't always view the agency that way. "In the beginning, DCF was my enemy," she said. "But the more that I allowed myself to accept reality, I realized DCF was there for me by protecting my children and making sure they were taken care of."

Nationally and in Connecticut, 60 to 70 percent of state child custody cases involve parents and substance abuse. About 50 percent of the children who go into care are returned to their homes.

Hamer's story of substance abuse began in 11th grade when she started smoking marijuana in the midst of a tumultuous childhood.

Her mother, she said, died from complications following an abortion. Hamer, a brother and two sisters went to live with their grandmother in New York City. They were there a year before another family tragedy motivated her grandmother to move to Hartford.

While living with her grandmother, Hamer said she was molested by a family member.

"I was an A student, but by the 11th grade, I wanted to fit in with the cool kids and started smoking marijuana," Hamer said. She went to live with her father in Newark, N.J., where she finished high school.

Following high school, Hamer went to live with her brother in Pueblo, Colo.

"In the beginning, life was good. I loved to travel. Colorado was so beautiful but my brother wanted to be my dad and after three months, I left."

Hamer “started sowing her own oats,” as she put it, dating, living with guys, having coke parties. “It was a different scene, a lot of drug selling, and I began to sell drugs, running between Pueblo and Denver, selling and picking up cocaine.” Hamer talks candidly of her past with the hope that it will inspire substance abusers to seek help.

During her drug using, she had two daughters with one man and a third with another.

Yet another relationship brought her a son. There were times when she left home to get a loaf of bread and did not return for weeks. She went in and out of substance treatment programs and moved from state to state. After leaving what she described as an abusive relationship in Kansas, Hamer found her way to Connecticut.

She lived with a sister in Middletown, then in a shelter, and later moved to East Hartford. All the time, she continued snorting coke.

“I did drugs at night. My kids took care of themselves because I was too high to get up,” Hamer said. “I got in a rehab ministry program, got to know God and was there for a year. I ended up in a shelter, got my own apartment and back into drugs.”

When Hamer thought DCF was near to taking her children, she scrambled to find homes for them. She asked family members or her babies’ fathers to care for her daughters.

Hamer wound up on a train headed for Stamford with her son Crey’on and one of her daughters — the other two were with family or their fathers. She made her way to a shelter in Bristol and again tried to put her life together.

But her hunger for drugs continued. She lost her son to DCF for the second time and then decided to get help. She had promise of a bed at the Morris Foundation in Waterbury. To make sure she showed up, Hamer locked herself in her apartment.

It was the weekend of July 4, 2007.

“I didn’t answer the telephone because I knew on July 5 if I didn’t show up, I would lose the bed,” Hamer said. “I went to the Morris Foundation and surrendered.”

As of July 5, 2009, she has been drug-free for two years.

She has regained custody of Crey’on, who is now 6. She has a job as a chair-car delivery person for Champion Ambulance Services. She has an apartment and her children in her life. In February, she hopes to take classes to become an emergency medical technician. “I had a long involvement with DCF. I had a DCF worker from hell. I fought DCF for a long time, did every stipulation asked of me, and they still wouldn’t give my son back. A judge transferred my case and I wound up with two DCF workers who really helped me.”

The Morris Foundation recovery specialist also helped her like getting furnishings for an apartment.

Now, DCF has called upon Hamer to help design services for recovering parents.

“She really wants to help others,” said Gary Kleeblatt, spokesman for DCF.

All told, DCF had 7,001 cases in 2000 that involved abuse or neglect. Between 2000 and 2004, the agency’s case load dropped 29.9 percent. As of Aug. 10, there are 5,010 cases.

“We attribute the reduction to working hard to keep families intact,” Kleeblatt said. “We have increased the number of families who are getting help with their children who live at home by 47 percent since 2002.”

Hamer is proud of her children and of being a member and co-founder of Second Chance Outreach, a group that talks to substance abusers to give them hope that they can get off drugs and restore their lives.

“People have to stop blaming others for their mishaps because our children are suffering,” Hamer said.