

SUCCESS STORY: A MOTHER'S JOURNEY

Meet Jennifer Dascher and her daughter Megan



As a parent of a justice involved individual, I never thought my journey would be as harrowing yet determinative as it has been. My daughter, Megan, was arrested numerous times, having been in and out of custody at least ten times, violated supervision regularly, and was in many rehabs. I am sure most people in the criminal justice system saw her as just an addict, a lost cause who was going to be found dead one day. However, I saw my daughter, someone that I loved dearly and someone I knew was still an amazing person.

Help me understand addiction and the resources

I come from a large, caring family that, luckily, has never experienced addiction. Becoming an addict does not happen overnight. You start to see changes, like I did in my daughter, and as a parent, you try to do the right thing. You do everything you can to be a good mother by working several jobs to ensure your two daughters have a stable house and always have food on the table. Eventually, you start to have concerns. You hope they are just experimenting like some other kids in the area, and you do your best to be there. One day, your world changes when she opens up and tells you that she is addicted to heroin and that she needs help. Megan's first of many rehabs.

I wish I knew then what I know now about addiction and the resources available in our communities and within the court system. My family and I were learning about addiction and what we should do from a TV talk show. You are often told what you need to do but rarely given a successful pathway. Many people in the system seldom explain addiction, the why, how others can be hurt, or share the resources. As a parent, being told to do something and follow through when you are not ready is very difficult. Educating me would have brought me along quicker. Probation officers have a wealth of knowledge and experience to share with families that can be extremely helpful.

Believe that success is possible

Hope is all you have sometimes as a mother. Some people in the system seemed not to care or believe that sobriety was an option. They were quick to share the failures, the horror stories, and what would happen if I did not cooperate. I felt like they thought that my daughter's death would be just less work for them. Why would I want to turn my daughter in when all I hear is that the system does not work? I felt hopeless.

Others showed and expressed hope. I felt like we shared a common goal and belief that she could succeed. Many years later, I now hear and see so many success stories. I encourage probation officers to share success stories, possibilities and hope with the family and loved ones of those individuals that are justice-involved. Share your desire and belief that success is a possibility. Even when going to jail is the only option, don't just tell me at least you know she is safe; focus on the future and a desire to help.

Help me understand the rules and the system

The rules and system are extremely confusing. It changed over the years, especially when she entered drug court, but I did not understand the expectations, the terminology, or what could or could not occur. I know she was an adult in the system but she is still my daughter. Spending a few extra minutes to make sure I understand can be extremely beneficial and can aid in gaining my cooperation.

Build Trust

I am sure many probation officers would describe me as uncooperative and enabling. I would fight with the officers and try to protect her. As a parent, it is difficult to hear about all the horrible things that your daughter is doing to others and herself to support her drug habit. I did not want her to be lumped in with all the others. She was not just another addict or another person on a caseload; she was my life. I often felt like others did not care about her.

I also had my trust broken several times. There were promises that information would not be shared or something would or would not happen. Why would I trust anyone who did not see Megan as an individual who broke promises or did not express a desire for her to be successful?

When you trust that the person you are talking to will do the right thing, you share more information and are willing to do the hard things, like turn in your daughter. You tell people where she is hiding and share concerns. You become a collaborative partner in the journey.



I believe that trust is the most important factor in engaging with the family. I always understood that people have a job to do and that sometimes the result is not what I may want. Speak to me as a human instead of the mother of an addict. Treat me with compassion and with an understanding that I am just trying to protect my daughter, someone that I love deeply. Take the time to listen to my concerns, answer my questions, and follow through with your promises.

A Success Story

Megan talks about two strangers who made a difference in her recovery journey. The first was a person who only spoke Spanish and would often stare at her when she was in the neighborhood. Megan later learned that the lady saw something in her, and she believed Megan should not be on the streets. The lady treated her as a human, not just an addict and invited her into her house and provided her with some food. The second individual was a man who picked Megan up in a rainstorm and provided her with a ride. He shared his journey and his hope. Two people who were not her family saw something in her and saw hope. I wonder what could have happened if she felt that the system saw something more than an addict and had hope for her.

Even though it had been offered previously, Megan finally entered drug court and her last rehab. She still had her struggles, but she has not used heroin since that day. My daughter is now a success story that she and others share often. Recently celebrating five years of sobriety, she is now Director of Operations and Business Development for Addiction/Mental Health Services at Promont Wellness. She is also the founder and executive director of a nonprofit, the Philadelphia Grace Project. The Grace Project is a testament to her commitment to providing hope and support to individuals navigating similar challenges.

My daughter and I now work together, usually every Thursday, in the Kensington section of Philadelphia, near the areas where she once frequented. We provide food, clothing, and other resources. Every week, we average 100-200 people, with 1-2 people entering treatment each week. Hopefully, by showing them the same kindness that strangers showed my daughter, they too will feel like they do matter and eventually ask for help.