

"This is life or death."



Baby Lydia may someday read this story. The words describing the courage of her mother, Jenna Corson, who completely changed her life - after she began loving herself.

"I don't ever want to use again," Jenna stated. "Lydia is the one who got me sober. Today, I am the one keeping me sober."

Jenna's life journey is not easy to hear. To fully appreciate her strength, each detail, failure, insight, and triumph must be understood.

At 14 years of age, Jenna began living on the streets, self-medicating with alcohol and marijuana to numb the pain of early childhood trauma.

While in this vulnerable state, she was preyed upon by a man over a decade older than her. "He wanted to control me," Jenna stated. This coercive relationship included Jenna being held down as he injected a needle full of drugs into her system. He introduced her to crack cocaine.

The relationship ended and Jenna again was homeless - each day simply trying to survive. Recognizing her addiction, she was in and out of multiple rehabilitation programs only to relapse upon discharge.



Jenna's experiences with abusive partners continued. Again, she engaged in a relationship with another individual who "was an addict" and was so demeaning in his verbal abuse, Jenna "cannot repeat" his words because they were so harsh and painful.

The couple fought each day. "That's what I thought love was," Jenna stated. "Being so hateful to one another. I thought this is what I am worth. A good five minutes of a relationship they gave me."

The couple was kicked out of home after home. At one point, they lived in an apartment with no heat, hot water, or electricity. With each failure, Jenna fell deeper into her substance use. "More shame caused me to use more," she stated.

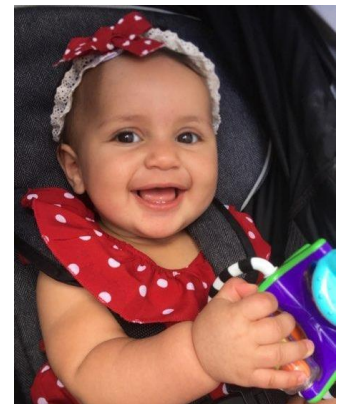
"I was in misery."

While in Stonington Institute detoxification program, Jenna found out she was pregnant. With another unsuccessful attempt to complete treatment, Jenna began using again, eventually gave birth to Lydia.

Lydia was born with fentanyl in her system - a deadly drug responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths across the country.

"I felt like a bad mother," Jenna stated when she learned of the condition of her little girl. "Ashamed and embarrassed" is how she described her feelings knowing that the Department of Children and Families became involved. "Removal was inevitable," she thought.

"My world was crashing down."



Upon DCF involvement, it was assessed that Jenna was not able to keep Lydia safe and the decision was made to place Lydia with kin while Jenna yet again started efforts to rehabilitate. She was told the goal was to have Lydia safely returned to her care - once progress was demonstrated.

"I was terrified I was not going to have the strength to get better," she stated.

Jenna entered The Connection - Hallie House for Women and Children in Middletown, a substance use rehabilitation facility for pregnant and parenting women. Jenna was informed that she had three months to remain sober and have Lydia placed with her or she would need to be discharged.

"This was life or death," she remembers thinking.

"I started kicking butt," is how Jenna described the work she put into reclaiming her life. Hours of trauma focused work, self-reflection, visits with her daughter, structured living and reconnecting with family all aided her recovery.

During this time, she was working closely with DCF Social Worker Niki Mikolinski from the Torrington Office. "She was always up front with me," is how Jenna described her. "She is very good at her job."



"Using drugs is not who I am as a person," Jenna stated. "I needed to love myself."

Lydia was reunified with Jenna and the family continues to reside at Hallie House. They will move into their own apartment in November under the Supportive Housing Program.

Her work is not done.

Jenna recognizes the impact trauma has played in not only her life but in the lives of other women she encountered in her journey. Within each rehabilitation placement, women disclosed domestic violence, sexual assault, and other forms of adverse experiences which led to their substance dependency.

Different women. Same stories.

Jenna's life goal is now to become a recovery coach. "I will work my butt off to get to that goal," she stated. She wants to help other women with similar experiences who are too afraid to open up about their own hurt just like she was years ago. "So many have experienced when you open up about your pain, you will only get hurt again."

Every week, Jenna works on one thing about herself which she wants to improve. She has six notebooks filled with personal inventory statements of her thoughts and actions during her recovery.

Jenna admits she was initially terrified to work with DCF. What would she say now about our involvement?

"It doesn't hurt to have DCF in your life. DCF is not the problem, it is you," she answered. "Take responsibility as this not about your DCF worker or DCF, it is about you. It matters how hard you are going to fight for your children."



Jenna realized DCF had Lydia's best interests at heart - and hers.

"In a way, you saved my life."



Jenna has reestablished the relationship with her parents after not speaking with them for approximately five years. During the initial stage of the investigation, the Agency pursued her family not just for placement of Lydia, but also to form a network of support around Jenna.

Not a day goes by when Jenna does not speak to her family members.

As far as her relationship with Nikki? "During each phone call and visit, she tells me she is proud of me."

Lydia's smile and personality light up a room. She is loved by a mother who fought so hard for her and most of all fought so hard for herself.