

"I did this."



On the 1,000th day of her sobriety, Ashley May-Williams "shimmied in the living room and ate steak for dinner" with her children. She paused and reflected back on the realities of what her life was and what it has become. However, this moment was not simply about her.

"It was also 1,000 days of trust for my kids," she stated.

The lessons Ashley has learned during treatment, maintaining sobriety, unpacking painful life experiences and the example she has set for her family are ones she now seeks to impart onto others.

Ashley is the teacher, and we are the students.

"I was broken," is how Ashley describes her life leading to an emotional dependency on alcohol. Drinking was her "crutch" when her anxiety was heightened. She describes it as an "invisible brick wall" in which she needed to "squeeze" her "soul through the cracks" to get through a normal day. "Alcohol numbed my fears."

Ashley was also engaged in a decades long unhealthy relationship. She endured emotional and financial control and an overall feeling of "not being important." Living in isolation became her daily routine as she infrequently left her home and experienced strained interactions with her parents, siblings, and friends. Alcohol became her "only coping mechanism for life."

"Use of alcohol as regulator is normalized in society," Ashley stated. With television and print ads associating a "good time" with the use of alcohol, "you don't want to think you don't have control."

Often, individuals wait too long to seek support.

"Fear of judgment causes so many not to get help," she stated.



Ashley also feared involvement with the Department of Children and Families who began working with the family. Her experiences with the Agency empowered her as she found caring and open-minded staff who engaged with her during one of the most difficult times in her life.

"DCF held my hand. It was not forced or coerced."

"They are angels among us," is how she refers to DCF social workers as well as the therapists from the Family Based Recovery (FBR) program who came into her life. "They wanted my home to be safe for me and my kids." There were no judgments - simply offers of encouragement and support.

FBR began visiting Ashley three times a week. They went deep to help Ashley understand the root cause of her alcohol use, anxiety, and other stressors. "I did not realize all of the things that affected me," Ashley recalls. Her family tree, childhood experiences and current relationships were discussed in detail over and over again.

Her children watched intently.



As Ashley was open with others, she was equally as transparent with her children who knew of her struggles. They saw their mother working closely with in-home providers, allowing them to experience both her commitment to recovery and vulnerabilities. "Being brave does not mean you are not scared," she stated. Ashley believes her children grew to respect her even more seeing the process up front and close.

Ashley describes therapy as having a "trickledown effect" on her children. What she learns, she passes onto them. They in turn teach others. Perhaps the biggest benefit of this is that Ashley is teaching her children how to ask for help - something she did not learn as a child.

Ashley was quick to point out that sobriety and recovery are "intergenerational" just like the "intergenerational survival" and "intergenerational mistrust" she felt growing up which in part led to her alcohol use.

Ashley remains open with her children on the days recovery becomes difficult. "I do not pretend it is easy," she stated.

For the Child Welfare professionals reading her story, what does Ashley want them to know about the profound impact they have on those they serve?

"Lead with an open heart," was Ashley's first point. Understand the pain the person is experiencing when they are sitting across from you. "They are hurting. They are hurting bad. When they drink or use, the hurting stops," Ashley stated.

The negative stigma of asking for help is very real and deters those from seeking support. "Focus on the strengths and not weaknesses," Ashley advises. She advocates for a twice a year mental health checkup like going to a dentist. Early detection may prove very beneficial. "Make it something you can talk about."

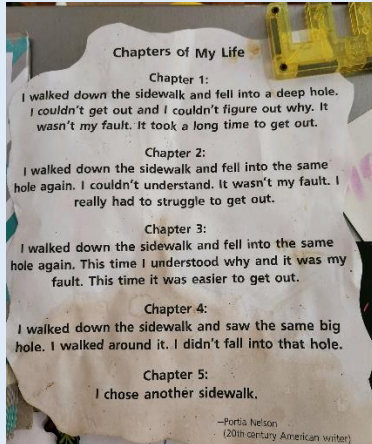
What Ashley also wants others to know about recovery is that the work is not easy, quick, nor does it truly end.

"It's been a long journey, but I am still on it," she stated.

"You have to trust the process. It is a hard process, but it is so beautiful on the other side."

The former disempowered and disconnected Ashley May-Williams is now the current Lion Scouts Den Chief for her two youngest children. She hosted a gathering in her home recently and the group had their first campout. "This is why I worked so hard," is what she thought as her children ran across a field playing with others.





Chapters of My Life

Chapter 1:

I walked down the sidewalk and fell into a deep hole. I couldn't get out and I couldn't figure out why. It wasn't my fault. It took a long time to get out.

Chapter 2:

I walked down the sidewalk and fell into the same hole again. I couldn't understand. It wasn't my fault. I really had to struggle to get out.

Chapter 3:

I walked down the sidewalk and fell into the same hole again. This time I understood why and it was my fault. This time it was easier to get out.

Chapter 4:

I walked down the sidewalk and saw the same big hole. I walked around it. I didn't fall into that hole.

Chapter 5:

I chose another sidewalk.

-Portia Nelson  
(20th century American writer)

One night, she played a game with her four children to see who could go the longest without smiling. "I lost immediately," she stated. Not hard to imagine given the life she has created for herself and those around her.

Recovery and sobriety touch everyone in her life. Ashley has re-established relationships with her parents, siblings and friends but has also stopped contact with others who did not necessarily want to see her succeed.

Each day is a new beginning.

Her teachings are not done. Ashley recently filmed a segment on the DCF YouTube channel - "*Doors to Hope and Healing*" - to tell her journey to over 50,000 cable subscribers.

"You own your story," she thought as she drove to the studio.

"I did this."