

"It's up to you to pick your path."



Mindy Richardson has a message for others struggling with substance use and involved with the Department of Children and Families. "Stop kicking and screaming and completely surrender," she stated.

"Treat DCF like a resource."

Stating these words was hard to imagine at one point in Mindy's life. A teenaged mother, entrenched in violent gang related activity as a "Head Queen" and selling drugs in some of the more notoriously difficult parts of Stamford, she was "addicted to the lifestyle."

Fast money, cars, material possessions and power.

Crack cocaine was the drug of choice, and its use was criminalized. Mindy became accustomed to the "environment and always having it around."

At 25 years of age, she took her first "hit" of cocaine. "I became a closet smoker for a while," is how she described her use. She found herself "trying to sell and use safely" but addiction followed a series of traumas.

Coercive and oppressive relationships with men were present in her life. She was assaulted by her boyfriend who found out she was secretly taking his drugs. This same man abducted her baby, against court order, for three months. "I saw a picture of my daughter on the news while I was in substance abuse treatment," Mindy remembers.

Mindy eventually found herself caring for three children, "one in pull ups and two in diapers," while her oldest lived with his grandmother. Her apartment was raided due to continued substance use and narcotics sales.

The children were eventually placed into the care and custody of the Department as Mindy once again sought rehabilitation after a period of incarceration. "I missed my son's first steps," she remembers about this painful period in her life.

Mindy was able to regain her true self again and reunification occurred. She was working in a pharmaceutical corporation, achieved affordable housing and was sober.

Circumstances changed when one of the children's fathers moved in with her only to begin dealing out of the home.

"Unaddressed issues will address themselves," Mindy stated. She stopped going to church and meetings as she developed trust issues with women. She describes bringing the "street mentality" to support groups which was not received well by the other participants. "This really had to do with me and not others," she stated. "I was in my own head and didn't want to be there anyway. This was all a part of self-sabotage."



Mindy vividly remembers having a glass of wine - White Zinfandel - which "moved to 10 glasses." She went home at 2:00 a.m. and saw a woman standing across the street from her home with whom she previously used cocaine over five years ago.

"I waited for the crack man with her."

Yet, her family thought she was doing well. "My father brought a cake to celebrate six years of sobriety. No way I could tell him I was using again."

"Across the street was my get high spot," Mindy recalls. She would use cocaine before her children went to school, and after she put them to bed. The drug dealing began again and despite interventions from her family, she wound up in a "crack house."



For a second time, her children were placed into the Department's care.

In the next stage of Mindy's journey, she found Social Worker Alicia Andriopoulos whom she describes as "part of my extended family."

For years, Alicia encouraged, pushed and motivated Mindy to achieve sobriety and reunification with her children. "I was tough at times, but Mindy needed that," Alicia stated. "She needed somebody who would not give up on her." The "tough love" approach worked best.

It was Alicia who calmed the children after Mindy missed visits and told Mindy they would stop altogether if she came again under the influence.

The Department filed for Termination of Parental Rights and sought adoptive homes for the children given Mindy's limited progress and the chronicity of her failure to rehabilitate.

Looking back, Mindy admits she was afraid of success given her past failures. "I did not feel I was deserving," she stated. "I had to do the work."

A turning point in Mindy's life was being in substance abuse treatment and reaching out to her Probation Officer who disclosed a warrant was out for her arrest. "If I am going to jail, I am going to go clean," she told her.



Mindy was raised in a two-parent family. With her mother being a Reverend and her father working construction, they did the best they could to raise the children. "I just chose to go down the wrong path," Mindy stated.

Mindy called her mother and asked to come live in her house.

"I promise you I'm done," she told her mother. "This lady believed in me."

"My mother's prayers saved my life," Mindy recalls. "God preserved me because of her."

From that point on Mindy attended an intensive out-patient program, church fellowships, meetings and worked on past traumas. "I forgave those who harmed me as a little girl," Mindy stated. "I developed a network of supports all around me including a sponsor."

"When I stopped kicking and screaming and allowed the process to be the process, it became a lot easier," Mindy stated.

Alicia was right by her side. "Alicia believed in me, she thought there was a rainbow at the end," Mindy recalls. "When I got back on the wagon, she believed I was on the wagon."

Mindy avoided jail after significant advocacy to the Judge from her family, friends and community partners who spoke on her behalf and wrote letters about her progress.

"You made a believer out of me," Alicia told her.

The children were reunified, and even though the Department's involvement ended, the relationship between Mindy and Alicia continued.



When Mindy was asked to be the keynote speaker for The Connection's Masquerade Auction Ball, she invited Alicia. She thanked Alicia in her speech and asked her to stand and be recognized. The audience gave Alicia a standing ovation.

Mindy is also grateful for Rose Smalls, the foster mother who cared for her children. They still remain in contact as she considers Rose part of "the village" of support for her

family.

Mindy is now giving back to the community. She began working as a Recovery Coach - being dispatched to emergency departments to sit bedside individuals struggling with addiction to support and connect them to services. Recovery Coaches primarily look for open detoxification beds and will call the individual daily for the first 10 days and then weekly to continue advocacy and support.

Mindy knew a lot of people on a personal level - those she formerly used with - when she began the work. "They saw me as a beacon of hope." Mindy believes she has "planted the seeds" of hope and recovery with over 700 people.

Now as the Regional Manager for the Connecticut Community for Addiction Recovery (CCAR) program, Mindy supervises Recovery Coaches across the Western Region which includes towns where she previously lived, used, and sold drugs. "I make a positive impact in my community where I previously wreaked havoc," she stated.



"My purpose in life is to help others find their way."

Mindy earned a bachelor's degree in business management and is now pursuing a master's degree in social work. She recently received a full pardon of past criminal charges and was inducted into the Connecticut Hall of Change which memorializes and recognizes the contributions of formerly incarcerated men and women that have made an impact on their communities.

What is her message for others involved with DCF?

"Know DCF can be a great resource versus being a burden or an enemy," she stated.

"If DCF took your kid, something happened. Take ownership."

Mindy believes the Department's work can serve as the "little push" someone needs to get into the "right direction."

Looking back, it is hard to compare the Mindy Richardson of the past versus the Mindy Richardson of today. She has so much to teach all of us about hope, resiliency, change and strength.

How is all of this possible from Mindy's perspective?

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