

## **Betsy's Story**

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By Betsy

Hi my name is Betsy F. I am 44 years old. I was discharged off Parole in June of 2001. I have been clean-and-sober and in recovery since September of 1999 when I first went into treatment as a BASN client. This is the story of how my life was slipping away from me and how I got it back.

In my late 20's and 30's I was getting into trouble with the law which eventually led to a stay in VSPW in California a prison for women. I began using pot at the age of 12. I was running from some serious emotions that I was facing which began at an early age. My first negative emotion was that of feeling abandoned, starting when my father walked out of my life never to return ... not even to this day. I always believed that I had done something wrong to cause him to leave. I could never understand how a parent could leave a child and never look back. I was only four years old when he left.

Later my Mom remarried. I learned more negative emotions such as things to do with hate, fear, shame, lies, and manipulation from the relationship I had with my step-father. I was forced to act as if this was all part of "love." I was a victim of child sexual abuse. My stepfather would sneak into my bedroom at night and do things that were unspeakable. He told me that if I mentioned it to Mom, I would be given away and that I would not be loved by mother anymore. This scared me so I did not tell. I was five years old when that started happening.

I had a younger step-brother and later my step-father would do the same to him. Eventually, he forced us both to do things together and if we refused we would be severely spanked or thrown up against a wall. Things only got worse as we grew older, turning more and more into violence. This went on until I was 11 years old when I started to realize this was not normal. I began shutting down. I became withdrawn and could not focus on school. I was filled with such hatred and disgust that I didn't know what to do.

I started hanging out with older folks at that time and I was introduced to pot. I liked it so much. It helped me to escape reality and for a while I was away from the abuse and neglect. Other siblings were born and the abuse stopped. By that time I

was so overcome with anger that I couldn't stand to be at home. I didn't want to look at my step-father or at my mother--who never caught on to what he was doing, or at least never caught him doing his sick stuff to us. So I was mostly alone in trying to deal with what had happened to me.

By the time I was in high school I found myself running away. My grades suffered and I began using other street drugs like LSD, mescaline, mushrooms, cocaine, and my favorite ... Meth. Because of the way I was always acting out, running away, and screwing up in school, my Mom got sick of me and we were always arguing. We had a real fight one day. Mom had never been the abuser and she had never laid a hand on me until that day. When I finally came home very late, she started yelling at me and began to slap me and scream at me, "What is wrong with you? Why are you acting this way?"

Thank God it all just came out. Everything. Mom stopped hitting me. Her mouth dropped open as if she didn't understand what I was saying. She began to cry and hold me. She said "I'm sorry. I didn't know." How I wish I would have said something a long time before that. My step-father was to be home soon, so Mom told me: "Take your brothers and sisters to the room and don't come out no matter what." Wow! The fight was loud. I heard yelling and things being broken. Eventually the police opened the door escorted us out and we were asked to leave for the night while he gathered his things.

Of course he denied everything and was never charged. By the time we got to court it was dropped due to a "statute of limitations" thing. I was even more pissed now after spilling our dirty secrets out in court in front of stranger's, only to see him walk free ... free to molest and abuse more kids. And that's just what he did with another wife he married who had a handicapped child. Because of this experience I became even more filled with rage and vengeance. I dived deeper into drugs and became a full-fledged addict ... no doubt about it.

I was a young woman who had "issues with men." I found myself in one unhealthy relationship after another, and began doing crimes against men. I was a wreck. I had two kids during this period of my life. I raised them through my addiction and eventually abandoned them by ending up going to jail and prison. This cycle went on for many, many years.

Later, when I was on parole, I was screwing that up, too, by failing tests or not reporting as directed. Finally, my parole agent talked me into going into a rehab program. He set me up with the "Oz"—the Frederick Ozanam Center in Concord,

where I was admitted as a BASN-sponsored residential client. I stayed at the Oz for 90 days. I got an extension, stayed a little longer, and then went into sober living. It was during that time that I began to understand what my problem was all about. For the first time, I started to take a look at all the gunk that was buried inside me and began addressing the issues that had been bothering me for so long.

One day at a time, I began to understand and could make sense of my addiction and why I didn't feel normal. I had a lot of help from a beautiful person named Debbie. She was a counselor for the BASN women's meeting. These meetings were very difficult to attend because Debbie was a real no-nonsense kind of counselor. She had a way of allowing us to let go of the wreckage and focus on a solution. She was able to keep us feeling safe in the meeting while we could address our issues. All of us had issues, too, just different ones for each person. [There isn't a women's group anymore but I feel very strongly that there should be one since women's issues can be quite a bit different than men's.] The BASN Alumni Association has been going on for years and it is a place I can go to meet with people who share similar experiences to my own ... people who got with the program and who have stayed in recovery after years in and out of jail and prison. Today, I am a strong confident woman. I still struggle with a few things like trust, and anger towards my step-father, but I am able to cope with it, without resorting to using drugs. I have had my two children back with me and have been in the same home for over eight years. I have no issues with the police and I'm off parole. I have a new car, and insurance, I have a good job, and I am now a restaurant manager and a certified trainer for the business. I went back to school and now have a degree in graphic design. I am a great mother and sister and daughter and niece and a friend to many, and today I am a great listener who has a lot of patience. I am strongly connected with the BASN Alumni Association, and am the vice president of our group. I am also active as an alumni association for the Ozanam Center. I have many great friends who have been with me in my recovery. I have worked the 12 steps and my life has changed so much that now I am a sponsor for other people coming into their own recovery.

BASN is my "home" meeting and the one that I support the most consistently. We are very strong in Contra Costa County. I have attended the last three annual Christmas dinners when family and friends all get together at a church we use for the celebration. We have a business meeting monthly and a monthly Alumni meeting, as well. It is a miracle to see a room full of convicts who have gotten good structured in their lives and who are trustworthy and have genuine respect for each other. We care about each other and what each one is going through. It is so

remarkable and I just want to tell people about it! Some of us look scary with our Harley's and our tattoo's, bald heads and all, but those things don't affect the fact that our beliefs have changed, and that with the changes to the way we think and feel, our lives have changed, too. We're new people.

What I want “normal” people to understand is that some of us who have been down the path of destruction have suffered a great deal growing up ... or what ever the case may be for each different person. Those hurts and disappointments—the abandonment and abuse—led us into dark situations and bad decision-making. Disappointment just becomes a part of life. One bad road leads to another wrong one, and pretty soon a person spirals down and out of control. In spite of the problems we had to live through, it is still our poor choices that actually led us to prison. I accept that. But I also understand that for all addicts and people abusing drugs and alcohol, there are underlying issues that need to be addressed. We can't just dismiss someone because of where they ended up because there are usually factors they didn't cause or ask for, lying at the root of it all. Working through all of that requires help ... the help of counselors and the help of peers. With programs such as BASN we can get the support we need to keep focused and grow into being healthy and productive members of society—sometimes for the first time.

I am thankful for the opportunity to share my story ... for allowing my success to be brought to light. Too many times we are prematurely labeled as failures, when that is not the case at all. We all have potential. Some never get a chance to realize the truth of that statement. But some find the way to recovery and finally learn that change has to come from within the person we always were, at heart—the person we needed to find within ourselves.

Welcome change, embrace it. live it. and love yourself first. That's my motto now.