

Christina's Story: She Made It!

It takes courage: Accident victim graduates local drug program

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By Ken Paglia, Placerville Mountain Democrat Staff Writer¹

A country song goes, "Saints are just sinners who never quit trying. Losers are winners who picked the wrong day."

For one local saint, in name at least, it would have been easy to give up long ago.

Christina St. Thomas, 27, was in an accident so horrific doctors said she may never walk again.

DUI charges from the wreck could have easily sent her to state prison. And after relapsing on drugs several times, that's exactly where the district attorney wanted to send her.

But on March 19, St. Thomas stood in a courtroom -- a graduate of El Dorado County's Prop. 36 drug court program.

"To succeed here there are three things you must do. First, you have to change your friends. Boredom will be one of the first things to take you back; so second, you have to get hobbies. Third, you have to realize everybody in the drug court system is not here to hurt you. They're here to help you," she said.

But St. Thomas' story with drugs begins earlier. She started using methamphetamine when she was 17 years old.

In 2001, she tried to get away from the drug by joining the Marine Corps, where she served as an administrative clerk.

In the Marines she met a man and got pregnant. She gave birth to her son Tyler in 2003.

But it didn't stop her from falling into bad habits.

"Towards the end of my military career it really spun out of control. Once I met someone else who was doing it, I was off. My superiors knew it. Everyone knew it.

But every time there was a surprise test, I was either sick or had to take care of my son,” she said.

She was honorably discharged in 2005, and moved in with her parents in El Dorado.

But she kept using drugs, and in September 2006 was picked up by law enforcement under the influence of drugs at Cameron Park library. Her son Tyler, then 3, was with her.

St. Thomas was sentenced to Prop. 36 – the law that allows non-violent drug offenders to receive rehab instead of incarceration.

She was also sentenced to parenting classes, and probation.

“I remember the first time I went into probation I showed up really late. I had been up all night. My probation officer just sent me home, and said he had to figure out what to do with me,” she said.

Wreckage

On July 18, 2007, after drinking all day, and right after injecting meth – St. Thomas crashed her vehicle into a tree going 60 miles per hour on Sacramento Street in Placerville.

The passenger was severely injured; with a fractured pelvis, broken jaw and broken arm.

St. Thomas had a fractured neck, spinal injury, collapsed lung, lacerated liver, fractured ribs, nerve damage to her head and body and third-degree burns.

She woke-up four days later in the intensive care unit of Sacramento’s UC Davis Medical Center.

“I remember thinking I wish I’d have died. It would have been easier to die,” she said.

St. Thomas was in the hospital for six weeks.

In the first few weeks of her stay, St. Thomas called her probation officer, Larry Cantwell.

In the darkness of the times, she doesn't remember what she said to him.

But Cantwell does.

“Christina called me from the hospital begging to go into drug therapy,” said Cantwell. “But I had spoken to a neurologist who said Christina would never be able to enter drug treatment. He said she would have significant problems.”

When St. Thomas was able to come home, she tried to stay low-key.

But old habits kept calling her back.

“I was basically staying home every day. I wrote letters. But I was so in need of a social life. So when one of my old friends asked if I wanted to go out, I was like sure. As soon as he picked me up, he handed me a beer. I knew what was going to happen. So I drank a beer. We went to hang out with friends. One thing led to another, and they busted out the crank.

“I had just put my family through this big ordeal, and then went out and used again,” she said.

Cantwell recommended out-patient therapy at Progress House in Placerville.

St. Thomas agreed, and started go to treatment sessions.

“But I was still drinking on the side. I thought meth was my problem, and I had taken care of that,” she said.

A little over a month later, St. Thomas was sentenced for her DUI from the accident.

She did two months in jail.

When she got out, she was ordered to a transition house the next week – but got drunk over the weekend.

On her graduation day March 19, Superior Court Judge Douglas Phimister admitted her treatment team made a mistake.

“Christina contacted probation on a Friday, and they instructed her to report Monday. For people in treatment that’s not a good thing.

“The DA wanted to send her to prison. I said we needed to fix a problem we helped create,” Phimister said.

Progress House counselor Cindy Ragen advocated on her behalf. Ragen asked the judge and district attorney to give St. Thomas a chance in residential therapy.

St. Thomas was given that chance, and went to Progress House in-patient treatment in Camino. Prop. 36 funded her stay.

“It was the best thing that ever happened to me,” she said. “In-patient treatment gave me new friends. It teaches you the basics of recovery. It teaches you to deal with the demons and get it all out in the open,” she said.

From Progress House, St. Thomas went to a transitional house for four months.

“I’m still connected to all those girls,” she said.

Clean-up

In November, St. Thomas got an apartment in Placerville with a roommate and her son.

“Since I had never paid rent in my life, it was a big thing for me to overcome. The independence was really cool, but if I wouldn’t have had a roommate, I would have been very lonely.

“Now I can focus on being a mom and doing what I’m supposed to do,” she said.

On her graduation day, after nearly two years of struggle, St. Thomas finally saw some light.

Judge Phimister dismissed charges from her 2006 arrest, stayed her fines and fees and significantly lowered the cost of her parenting classes.

“We do something backwards here. People do really well and we tell them don’t come back,” said Phimister.

Cantwell also spoke at the ceremony.

“Christina’s case is one that tugged on my heartstrings. The first time Christina came to probation she was in a walker. She got lost in the probation department because her motor skills just weren’t there.

“But last week I saw Christina out jogging with her father. Today she has a full-time job, and she’s a vibrant woman. I’m just terribly proud of what she’s accomplished,” Cantwell said.

Drug counselor Cindy Ragan talked about the changes she’d seen.

“Christina, you set your mind to remain open and honest. Honest about your fears, and your denial. I’ve got to tell you that you are a miracle. You are not the woman you were when you started here,” she said.

Christina St. Thomas has been clean and sober since May 2, 2008.

She wished to thank everyone involved in her recovery, especially Cantwell and her counselors.

¹The California Department of Alcohol and Drug Programs sincerely thanks Mountain Democrat Editor Mike Rafferty for allowing Ken Paglia’s inspirational telling of Christina’s story, originally published in the Mountain Democrat on April 6, 2009, to be presented on this website.