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Note: Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of sources in the following article.

Through love and Community Justice, couple rebuilds life together

ATHENS, Ohio – Recovering from addiction takes dedication, clarity, will and support, among other attributes. Two people participating in the Athens County Prosecutor’s Office’s Community Justice programs also have a powerful asset in their recovery journey: Love.

Troy Gates and Cierra Macy met several years ago and bonded over a love of music. Macy came from the western United States while Gates grew up in Ohio. They got to know each other in short time and connected so well that Gates proclaimed to a friend that he was “going to marry that girl.”

Macy had struggled with drugs since she was a teenager, turning to substance misuse after the death of a family member. She was once in the top of her class academically and played in an orchestra. Before high school, she shunned those achievements for fear of being ostracized by classmates. She fell in with a crowd that started experimenting with pills. Macy felt she had a handle on what she now realizes was the start of addiction but soon cocaine and other drugs entered the picture, and her reality became distorted.

Gates smoked marijuana in high school and would experiment with other drugs with friends on occasion. He attended college and started drinking alcohol “a lot,” he said. He too eventually tried cocaine and then mixed Adderall to help with his studies. He described his use of pills as the start of his realization of his addiction.

When Macy and Gates met, the two felt they were in a good place in terms of their drug misuse. They actually bonded over their recovery efforts at the time. The two kept in touch and formed a long-distance relationship before Macy decided to move to Ohio to be with Gates. The two were inseparable before their drug habits and individual addictions collided and eventually led to a breakup.

“It’s hard for anything healthy to work when drugs are involved. Things just don’t end well,” said Macy.

“We were growing with each other and learning but then would have heartbreak and struggle. That’s the rollercoaster that comes along with addiction,” she added. “I was getting involved with shadier and shadier people and getting taken advantage of because I always tried to see the good in people.”

Macy began using heroin and methamphetamine and one day, she was stopped by law enforcement after leaving a well-known drug house. She watched in tears as police confiscated heroin and needles from her vehicle.

“I broke down and surrendered at that point,” she said. “I went through the court process and everything, looking for a way out.”

Meanwhile, Gates struggled with his own addiction while simultaneously trying to keep tabs and Macy and see to her safety.

“Trying to stay around to protect her got me further involved in drugs than I already was and I ended up being homeless for about a year or so,” he said. “At one point, I had everything. But it all stopped. It had been taken apart and was gone.”

During his drug misuse, Gates described himself as just a shell of who he was supposed to be.

“I stopped caring about anything. I was only concerned with finding drugs, eat a little when I could, sleep when I could but it was all a mess,” Gates said. “I stopped having goals except for what was immediately next. You just try to survive it. You’re not able to think about anything else.”

Macy said she felt as though she was possessed by a demon.

“You’re not the same person. My soul struggled to shine,” she said. “Addiction decides things for you. I did things I’d be physically sick over now because of how selfish it was.”

Gates’ involvement with law enforcement came on a charge of possession of drugs. He was offered the opportunity to join the Athens County Empowerment (A.C.E.) diversion program. The threat of incarceration hanging over his head was more than enough to keep Gates on track.

“Going to prison ... that alone was enough for me to change my life and get clean,” he said.

Macy was placed in the Athens County Prosecutor’s Office’s Vivitrol program. Through the Community Justice initiatives, the two started rebuilding a life together while simultaneously building a house together.

The house became a metaphor for Gates and Macy’s relationship. Community Justice served as the foundation, Vivitrol became the concrete and A.C.E. the walls. Piece by piece, Gates and Macy created a new life together as additional parts of their home came into being. At times, the house was left incomplete, allowing the rain of drugs to put a damper on what they were trying to create together. Inevitably, Gates and Macy worked together to patch the holes of the home and their relationship and now trust — in themselves and in each other — serves as their roof.

Macy and Gates have been sober for more than a year. Macy credits the Community Justice program with giving her structure for her life when she needed it most. The couple praised the staff at the prosecutor’s office and Health Recovery Services for their genuine care for their wellbeing.

“Vivitrol and (Gates) saved my life,” Macy said. “I didn’t have to ask for him to be there. He was just there. He pushed me to do the program and to do it right.”

Gates said that even in his worst state of mind, he remembered the connection he felt with Macy.

“She’s an amazing, beautiful person. I didn’t want to see her die. It was scary for a time,” Gates said. “I love her more than anything.”

“I’d give up anything for that love,” Macy said. “There’s nothing like it. We’re lucky we found each other. Now, after all that, it’s bonded us in such a way that we’ve grown into who we were supposed to be. We did this together and I’d do anything to keep that.”