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Nelsonville native falls to rock bottom, rebuilds life with help from prosecutor's office

ATHENS, Ohio – Lindsey Brooks grew up having everything she could want in her hometown of Nelsonville; friends, good grades in school, great church life, a supportive family ... She describes it as a “perfect childhood.” That ideal upbringing all changed at age 13 when she had her first drink of alcohol and a life of multiple incarcerations, homelessness and even prostitution would ensue.

Through the help of Athens County Prosecutor Keller Blackburn and his office's Community Justice programs, Brooks now helps other women in recovery by using her experiences and empathy to guide others to a better life.

As a teenager, Brooks began recognizing feelings of anxiety, which was compounded as her parents went through a bitter divorce. At a party one evening, Brooks and some friends drank alcohol for the first time.

“I think I was born with this disease. I have the characteristics and tendencies of addiction,” Brooks said. “None of my friends that night that had their first drink turned out to be alcoholics but, for me, that was my ‘aha!’ moment. That drink quieted my anxiety.”

Brooks added, “I didn't make a decision that night to do this all the time but (the disease) did.”

As she moved through high school, Brooks was a regular at parties. While friends feared the consequences of being caught, Brooks did not. She didn't feel the significance or costs of alcohol addiction until she began to have run-ins with law enforcement and her parents caught on to her behavior.

At age 17, Brooks tried cocaine.

“I’d moved from Nelsonville to Kentucky and that was what was there. Nelsonville people drank and smoked weed. People in Maysville did crack,” she said.

Her first hit came when she was drinking. Her defenses were down, and she didn’t try to stop herself. A euphoric feeling swept through Brooks’ body. She felt bulletproof and charged ... but it wouldn’t last.

“Crack cocaine is a horrible drug. It’s a short high and it’s expensive. To normal people, it’s hard to comprehend but it’s like a website buffering. For a moment, everything is just blank. You don’t feel anything. Whatever you’re running from it just goes away for 20 or 30 seconds. Then, it hits you harder than ever.”

Brooks graduated at 17 and within the next year, she would find herself in the presence of law enforcement a handful of times. Each incident resulted in low-level misdemeanors for possession of drugs and/or paraphernalia. She had her first jail stint of 90 days and was sent to her first treatment center at age 18.

Without knowing, Brooks’ family acted as enablers. When she was in trouble, someone was quickly there to help. They’d pay fines and bond amounts and help with transportation.

“They viewed it as a cry for help and I ran with that,” she said.

Admittedly, Brooks didn’t take her time in the treatment center seriously. However, between there and jail, she had time to sit still and think for the first time, she realized she was tired of hurting people and upsetting her family. Still, Brooks felt her addiction problem was limited to cocaine, not alcohol.

She went on to have a child and felt that the new life in her hands would help her stay sober. She would only recognize years later the amount of undue pressure that imposed.

Brooks stayed sober until she was 21 when she reasoned that she’d never had a drink at legal age, and she convinced herself that her prior addiction issues may have just been a phase. During that same point in her life, she decided to enroll in college, majoring in criminal justice administration.

“That was ironic. I wanted to be a drug and alcohol counselor, but I was on drugs and alcohol,” Brooks said.

For the next three years, Brooks drank and found drugs when she did. She said, “Alcohol drove me to the ledge and cocaine threw me over.”

Alcohol, drugs, neglected studies and letting down her little girl led to Brooks breaking down and confiding to a school professor who later connected her to a counselor. For the next year, Brooks underwent treatment again while her daughter resided with her mother.

“I started to realize that if you put a drink in me, everything changed. The way I talked, acted and thought all changed. It was my Jekyll and Hyde,” Brooks said.

For nearly a decade, Brooks stayed sober. She stayed away from certain crowds, followed her treatment guidelines and worked to be a productive member of society. She married, had her second child and moved back to Nelsonville.

At 32 years old, Brooks started to look for happiness outside of herself. She craved the approval of others and fell off her treatment program directives. Relationships ended and money dried up. Emotionally and spiritually, Brooks was a wreck, but her pride got in the way of finding a healthy resolution. She believed she was supposed to be better than to have those feelings again. She hid the truth from the people closest to her.

And she turned back to the bottle.

Day by day, Brooks sunk further. Less than six months later, she was guilty of a second-degree felony charge of burglary and sentenced to nine months in prison with a few years hanging over her head. Instead of being remorseful, Brooks was filled with resentment. She resented that her prior enablers had cut ties. She resented herself for failing again.

“That’s the disease,” she said. “It wants you to be angry, insecure and resentful. I would think about specific things that I’d lost and those feelings would grow stronger.”

“It took me years to realize they didn’t take anything from me. I gave it all away through my actions and behaviors,” Brooks added.

Living out of a halfway house in Columbus, Brooks had no identification, no money, no transportation and felt abandoned. She continued to drink and misuse substances. When the desperation hit hardest, Brooks turned to prostitution to fuel her addiction. In one summer, she was in and out of jail four different times. When she stole a family member’s car, Brooks was charged with grand theft auto and receiving stolen property. She was granted placement in a treatment center, but she ran.

While on the run, Brooks asked a stranger at a McDonald’s restaurant for money to buy food. For reasons she’s still not sure of to this day, she confided in the man. She told him her story through tears, and he handed her \$10.

Brooks used the money to get high.

Weeks later, Brooks was arrested again and had a visitor in jail. When she was led to him, she was shocked to see the man from the McDonald’s waiting. He explained he was an attorney and had recently connected with her family after seeing her in Columbus.

They arranged a meeting with Athens County Prosecutor Keller Blackburn.

“He gave me one last chance,” Brooks said of Blackburn. “I was at rock bottom. I’m not proud of what I’ve done but that experience has helped me relate to others.”

“A prosecutor’s role is to make the community better. Giving people chances to recover makes the community better,” Blackburn said. “Recovery is a lifelong struggle, sometimes giving someone a chance doesn’t work, but I would rather try and help someone and hope that it works, rather than give up.”

In the four years since she entered Blackburn’s Athens County Empowerment program, Brooks, 40, has stayed sober. She has worked to repair her relationship with her children and has since added a 2-year-old son to the fold. For the last three years, Brooks has helped women in recovery as a residential aide. She bought her first car, rebuilt her relationship with God and continues to work on her relationship with her family.

“There’s always some fear of relapse but I can keep doing what I’ve been doing and surround myself with the right people. My willingness to listen to other people has changed. Age has helped me,” Brooks said. “I didn’t do the things I needed to do so many times. Now, I’m about my kids and my life. The women I get to help now, they are me. I was them. I share my experiences and emphasize that it takes time. Addicts, we give up if things don’t happen as fast as we think they’re supposed to. But it takes time.”

Brooks is also continuing to work on her bachelor’s degree and has a goal of applying for licensure to become a counselor. When she looks back on her journey, she comes away with an overwhelming feeling of gratitude.

“I’m grateful to Keller and the whole team of people with the direction they’re taking in Athens County,” Brooks said. “When you’re a drug addict and you’re sent to prison, society deems you as unfit. You are. You committed a crime. But Keller has created proactive programs to help people recover. Prison without recovery is never going to work. I’m grateful that they’re taking things in the direction they are.”



(Lindsey Brooks, left, is pictured with her children.)