

Profile

A Lifetime of Service

Jenniffer Truitt Brings Personal Experience to Helping Homeless

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COPY EDITOR

Homelessness is a fluid and elusive phenomenon. Studies estimate that between 2.3 and 3.5 million people experience homelessness, with one out of 50 children in the U.S. homeless each year. Mental illness is one of the third most commonly cited causes.

Jenniffer Truitt has faced these realities firsthand. On May 10, Truitt, who will soon assume the position of executive director of We Survive, Inc., a organization that helps individuals overcome obstacles to live healthy, active lives, will share her own story at We Survive's first Rock-a-Thon fundraiser to promote mental health and well-being.

As current program director of the Women Offering Wisdom (WOW) program for We Survive, Inc., Jenniffer Truitt works with children facing harsh realities like homelessness and mental illness to help them lead productive, positive lives. Many of the children who will hear her story have also faced homelessness and mental illness. But Truitt knows that while mental illness is a symptom, it doesn't have to define one's identity.

"We go and we talk in schools, and one of the biggest things I tell kids is 'Look at the person next to you. They could live in a homeless shelter. You don't know that,'" she said. "They don't talk about it. They look like you, talk like you, eat the same things that you do and they might even like the same movie that you do. They're the same people. But they just need a little help."

Truitt was introduced to the realities of mental illness right at the start. Born in California, she moved four times and her mother, Cynthia, who was diagnosed with bipolar disorder, gave birth to four more children within five years. By age six, she and her family were in Kentucky for the second time, living out of a car. They eventually made their way to Wayside Christian Mission, and subsequently into foster care. Truitt ended up in her maternal grandmother's care; however, her grandmother suffered from the same mental illness as her mother and was unable to bear the stress of caring for another child. Truitt's mother soon gathered her siblings back under one roof.

"If you know anything about the system in Kentucky, it's a miracle once all your children are split up in foster care to get them all back and in one house again," Truitt said.

The family moved to Larue County. It was here that Cynthia's illness spun out of control. She suffered hallucinations and would disappear for days at a time. Truitt found herself in the role of "Mommy" to her siblings, which gave her a grounding that helped her to cope with her circumstances.

"I think as a child, you learn what is your norm, and once that becomes your norm, you don't know anything else, so it doesn't really bother you," she said. "You get used to that."

Truitt never realized how unusual her childhood had been until she and her siblings were taken in by custodial parents.

"It was only then that I started to notice the residual emotional effects that I probably would have not ever come to realize until I was an adult if I hadn't hit that situation at 11," she said. "It was letting go of that caregiver role with my siblings. My adopted mom would always say, 'I'm the mom now. You be the kid.' I was always stepping in and trying to take over. It was really hard to let that go because when children are in that situation, whatever they're doing becomes their identity."

Truitt began crafting her own identity, graduating from high school and enrolling in nursing school. While in college, she further proved that symptoms don't always equal identity.

Truitt became the Advance Directive Surrogate for her mother's mental care at age 17. She personally supervised her mother's medications and advocated for her treatment. At age 19, she began looking at the 21 medications her mother was taking - "when your pill box can't close, it's ridiculous," she said - and



determined that her mother's bipolar diagnosis must be incorrect. She encountered ageism against her recommendations again and again, until one severe episode - and one doctor's new opinion, after Cynthia was enrolled in a sleep study at Baptist East.

"I got a call in the middle of the night. They said 'Your mom has gone crazy. She has torn everything off the wall, ripped out every piece of equipment we have,'" Truitt said. "The psych doctor came down. She looked at me and said, 'This isn't bipolar. Tomorrow, she's going up to the psych ward, we're removing all meds, we're going to reevaluate her and we'll get back to you. We're going to start from the bottom, take her off everything.'"

With a clean slate, Cynthia was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder and borderline personality disorder in two days. She was placed on new medications and became a completely different person.

"Within a month, I had never been able to carry on a conversation with her like that," she said. "And it took one doctor respecting that it didn't matter what my age was."

Today, Cynthia is healthy and functional, and Truitt has earned a Masters in Occupational Therapy. Cynthia herself came up with the Rock-a-Thon concept, which will raise much-needed funds to help those who still struggle with mental illness.

"I think more people walk around with some sort of undiagnosed mental disorder than we know. And they don't even recognize that just a little bit of help could get them a long way," Truitt said.

The Rock-a-Thon, presented by We Survive's Haven of Hope and Sullivan University's College of Pharmacy, will take place on May 10. For more information, visit <http://www.rockathon.info>.

Photos by CHRIS HUMPHREYS | The Voice-Tribune



Jenniffer Truitt with her two children.