

Emma's Story

When Emma was 8 years old, she remembers caring for her 7-year old brother for three days after their mother disappeared. In the months and years that followed, Emma had stints in foster care, juvenile detention centers, and sometimes back at home. "I'd disappear for weeks, even months, and then come home," says Emma. "I'd get sent to juvie, disappear again, show up back at home, and then mom would call the cops again, and I'd get sent back to juvie...over and over."

By her freshman year of high school she was using drugs to escape from her problems, and skipping more days of school than she was attending. Emma says she longed to find people who would accept her. At 14 she began living on the streets in the U-District because, she says, "not being at home was better than being at home. I wanted to disappear, and I did."

"I remember standing on street corners in the U-District, sometimes high for as long as three days. Often I hadn't eaten or slept or washed in so long. I'd beg strangers for money. It was disgusting." One of her street friends introduced her to Street Youth Ministries (SYM) during this time. Emma was hungry and cold the first time she walked into the SYM drop-in center: "Microwave burritos, fruit snacks, juice, showers — I couldn't believe it," she says.

Soon she became a regular at SYM, often standing outside and waiting for the doors to open so she could eat, take a shower, and get warm. SYM staff members built relationships with Emma and she was amazed to discover a safe place where adults wanted to help her. "I didn't have positive role models when I was growing up. People at SYM showed me I was worth something. They were willing to be there for me when I literally didn't have anybody."

It took Emma about a year to get clean: "It's easy to fall into that hole, and hard to get out," she says. She watched some of her friends end up in hospitals and jail cells, and grieved as other friends died of drug overdoses. "I wanted to learn from their mistakes," says Emma.

During that time, an SYM staff member helped her apply for a community college scholarship which enabled her to earn her GED and take additional classes. "I was blown away that someone would help me go to college. I never thought I was smart enough or had enough money for that."

Now clean for 8 years, Emma is proud of what she's achieved, and grateful for the help SYM provided along the way. She's rebuilt a relationship with her mom, has housing, has a good network of friends, and loves her restaurant job. She's working on her A.A. degree, and wants to take college business courses with the hope of someday starting her own business.

"Life is awesome," says Emma. "I look back 10 years and I can't believe I was running around, getting high, and had nowhere to live. Some of my friends didn't make it. But I did. I'm really proud of getting myself out of that situation, and I'm thankful for everything SYM did to help me."