

Story of Hope #1

Story of Leah



The heartbreak of Leah's story is in its ordinary beginnings. Leah tested her boundaries and struggled to find her place after high school, much like any teen making her way in the world. Leah was not a stupid kid or a lazy kid. She was a young person without the kind of supports young people need.

In high school, life at home grew unsteady for Leah as her mom's drinking increased and they clashed over the friends Leah was hanging out with. Days before her senior graduation, things grew heated: "She was really drunk, came up to my room, and said I had a week to figure out what I was going to do with my life," Leah remembers.

When she describes the next several months, Leah talks about how she was fearful of burning bridges and using the people that she depended on for a place to stay. She lived with friends, moved back in with her mother when she got a job, then moved out again when she lost it and more fighting ensued.

"One day I was sitting in there in the transit center," she recalls. "And I decided to take the bus to Seattle." She was 19. She didn't know how she was going to eat. She didn't know where she was going to sleep. A woman on the bus told her about the YWCA, and that's where she spent her first night.

A couple of months later, Leah was living under a bridge and dating a heroin addict. One day a friend she met on the streets told her there were places in the University District where they could get a meal and take a shower. This was a revelation. Leah started spending time at Roots, an overnight shelter, and Sanctuary Art Center, a drop-in program where she could work on a piece of art. She also met the staff at Street Youth Ministries and came for Drop-in and a shower. "They remember people," she recalls. "That strikes me, because the people who remember your name are your family and friends--you can tell the people at SYM are there because they want to be there."

As Leah's circle of friends widened that year, so did her exposure to harder drugs. Her life seemed to fast-forward at that point: "Next thing I know, I'm living up on Capitol Hill dating a drug dealer and staying in these apartments where he would deal, because as long as he brought meth, we had a place to stay." She started shooting heroin too.

Her wake-up call came when she found out she had Hepatitis C. She knew she needed help, and she entered a month-long public treatment program to get clean. Leah's voice cracks when she talks about SYM's impact on her life at that time. "They were the only ones that wrote me letters when I was in treatment--the only ones. That meant the world to me." Leah's road to recovery has been long and difficult. She talks about heading straight to SYM when she was struggling after a relapse, "Because I knew they wouldn't scold me--they would welcome me back with open arms and just say, 'What can we do to help you get back on track?'"

A turning point came when an SYM staff member told her about the Year Up career program for urban at-risk youth and helped her apply. She interviewed and scored a coveted internship at corporate REI headquarters. She learned all kinds of new skills there and explains that networking in particular has changed her perspective on interacting with adults. "Now that I know what it is, I try to network wherever I go. It's those connections in life that help you."

She is also confounded by how her work friends and mentors keep reaching out to her. "I thought after I left I'd lose all contact. But they are really my friends and keep calling me and asking me out to lunch. Having those connections makes me feel so good." Leah has been off the streets for a couple of years and is in stable housing with a roommate. Right now she is excited about the possibility of returning to REI as a full-time employee, but eventually she wants to become a social worker so she can help other youth get off the streets.