

It's Never Too Late

By Marshall Harrison, Dauphin County

September 25, 2007 - I thought it was the worst day of my life, but it was the best thing that could have happened to me. You see, on that day I was locked up on sixteen drug charges and thought my life was over. All my selfishness had caught up to me, and all my drug selling and drug using had come to an end. Up until the day of my arrest I thought my life was OK. I had three beautiful daughters and a girlfriend who loved me to death, but none of that mattered. All I could see was me doing my own thing and letting everybody deal with life on their own. Drugs were my only friends and I hung out with them all my life.

I did what many of us do – allow our past to control our thoughts. In my case, I was sexually abused at the age of seven. This horrible act made me angry inside, so angry that I didn't trust or love people – even myself – because I thought it was my fault. Not knowing any better, I kept this all to myself until I turned 35. I didn't want kids because I didn't have any love for myself, let alone love for a child.

I had my first child when I was 21, but I didn't play a part in her life. I would see her from time to time and make promises, but when it came to a choice of getting high or seeing her, the drugs won that battle. I remember one night I was getting high and I had enough with life and wanted to kill myself. I called her to say I loved her and I will see her around someday. "Always remember that I love you," I said. She knew what I was really saying and started crying. Then she said, "Even though you were not around, I still love you because you are my dad. So don't worry; I forgive you." That was ten years ago. It still wasn't enough to get me on the right path.

Finally, in jail, something clicked in my heart and woke me up. I found the peace that was missing all my life – God. This time things were different. I finally surrendered. I had enough with the way I was living and feeling about myself. I was tired of hurting myself and my family. Things had to change and change fast. So I read many self-help books, went to church in jail, and made a commitment to living a clean and sober life. I started to understand my purpose in life and wanted to become what God intended me to be.

Then I felt this love for my children that I never felt before. My youngest daughter, who was four at the time, said something really life changing for me. I spoke to her on the phone from jail and she told me she'd promise to stop being bad if doing so would make me come home. The thing that changed my life was the fact that she was willing to give up something just to have me in her life. **Whoever said a child can't teach you something?** At that moment I promised myself that I would never hurt or leave her again.

Being released from jail has allowed me to do the things I always wanted to do as a father. I spend some good quality time with my kids, mostly listening, because I have to get to know them all over again. I'm still learning how to be a father so I know things will take time. My main goal is to gain their trust, knowing that daddy is here and I'm never leaving them again. My youngest daughter still has her guard up when we are together. We laugh, play games, crack jokes, but when it's time for me to go back to the halfway house, she doesn't like it and never kisses me goodbye. My parenting group has helped me a lot; I'm still attending even though I completed



Marshall Harrison, of Harrisburg, and his daughter Mikayla, age 5.

what was required of me to do.

I know now that time is running out. Before you know it, your kids are all grown up and out of the house. I want to have a loving, trusting relationship with my kids and it all starts with me. So if you can learn how to do that with the help of others, sign me up. The sad thing is not the father that doesn't know, but the father that doesn't try. I have to try; they need me more than anything in this world. Today I can say that **I understand the importance of a father in a child's life.** You have to dedicate your life to your kids, and before I went to jail I didn't understand that. Now I tell this to every other father I meet, "Once you are involved in your kids' lives you'll never want to leave again."

Marshall Harrison is currently a resident at the Community Corrections Center in Harrisburg. He attends the PFSA-affiliated family support program there. His children are now 22, 6 and 5 years old. ❖

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Here's The Proof

Over the years, many parents involved in PFSA programming have shared stories of the challenges and joys of raising children, often in situations that are less than ideal. These stories help other parents learn and grow, while professionals who work with families gain insight into "what works" with families. But very few have reached out to others as consistently as Marshall Harrison of Harrisburg. He has been working with PFSA to help other parents for over four years – in this newsletter and PFSA-sponsored family support programs, as well as in his job as house manager for the Salvation Army Adult Rehabilitation Center in Harrisburg.

"I'm now doing all the things I only dreamed of doing in the past. It's real now," he says. Marshall spends much of his free time with his family – his girlfriend Sarah, daughters Clarissa, age 26, Mikayla, 10 and son Carter, 3. "Saturdays we're at Mikayla's basketball games, or whatever else she's doing. We eat out as a family, have fun and just hang out together. My oldest daughter lives in New York and she comes to visit, or we go there." He especially likes taking care of Carter and is proud that Carter has never known his dad as incarcerated or addicted to drugs.

Marshall credits his relationship with God, his network of supportive people and the willingness of his family to forgive and open their hearts to him as the factors that have changed his life so completely over the past five years. "I had harmed my family in so many ways – being in and out of jail, not being honest, breaking promises – the way you do when you're addicted to drugs. Especially with my older daughter, I'm blessed to have a connection with her now, because even though I wasn't part of her life as she was growing up, she has given me a second chance and I'm just so grateful to be a dad" he says. "I didn't want to miss out on any more of my children's lives, and that became the priority for me." Now, he looks for ways to share the message that parenting is the most rewarding part of his life.

PFSA Noted in Child Abuse Prevention Report

Last year, staff members of the Joint State Government Commission prepared a report for Pennsylvania's General Assembly, in which they examined child abuse prevention programs across the state and outlined the work of each organization. The report, published in November 2014, included PFSA and looked at our three initiatives: Family Support Programs for parents, The Front Porch Project, and Mandated Reporter Training. In each program area, the authors noted the effectiveness of our programs.

When discussing the services PFSA offers to local affiliates, who use our materials, training and technical assistance in their work with families, the report noted that "by addressing several risk factors and providing additional oversight to vulnerable children, the

Recently, Marshall accompanied PFSA Program Director Beth Bitler to do a brief presentation to senior staff of the PA Board of Probation and Parole in Camp Hill. We were invited to talk about how PFSA helps incarcerated parents reconnect with family through our weekly support programs in Community Corrections Centers, where Mr. Harrison first learned about PFSA. He shared his experiences as an ex-offender, recovering addict and – most importantly – father. "If you would have told me a couple years ago that I'd be here talking to the people who were watching me," he said with a smile, "I would have said you were crazy." He went on to talk about the crucial role that support plays in lives of fathers who want to get back on track with their children. "You can't really do it alone. You need people to talk to when you're not sure you're on the right path, and answers to questions. This program gave me that support."

The audience was impressed by Marshall's courage and humor as he talked with them. "**Mr. Harrison is proof that change can happen with determination, support and mentoring. He is an example of what works through community services and collaborations such as exist with PA Family Support Alliance,**" said Daniel McIntyre, Deputy Executive Director for the PA Board of Probation and Parole. "I think we were all inspired and uplifted by how Mr. Harrison now gives back to the community. It added so much to our meeting to see that programs do work."

Thanks to Marshall Harrison for sharing his life experiences with others and to the PA Board of Probation and Parole for listening! ●



Marshall Harrison and his family.

PFSA Family Support Program appears to be an effective prevention initiative." The description of our Mandated Reporter Training Program, which is a substantial part of the prevention work we do, included our commitment to introducing new technologies to meet then ever-increasing needs of mandated reporters. The Front Porch Project, now in its fourth year, was described as "a good example of a well-designed and well-executed community-based, general-public initiative that may play a notable part in facilitating primary prevention in the community."

We appreciate the thoroughness with which the Joint State Government Commission conducted their research and the opportunity to talk about the important work of child abuse prevention. ●