

BURNSVILLE MOM HELPS WOMEN HEAL FROM OPIOID, SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS

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Jessica McCurry is a Peer Support Specialist for TRACES (Toe River Advocates for Community Education and Support), a MAHEC initiative designed to help moms and babies at risk of opioid dependence.

Yancey—"I'm a graduate of Mountain Heritage, but don't hold it against me," Jessica McCurry shared with a gymnasium full of students at a school assembly at Madison High School in February.

The laughter and playful boos bounced off well-traveled gym floors. But you could have heard a pin drop a few minutes later when Jessica, a lifelong Burnsville resident, shared her experiences from ten years of struggling with an opioid use disorder.

It was a long journey and one in which she almost lost everything that was most important to her, including her child and her health. The gasps coming from students in the bleachers didn't need any amplification. She made her point. Opioid addiction is that powerful.

Jessica decided to go to an inpatient treatment center and managed to find one in Charlotte that would let her bring her daughter, which enabled her to get treatment.

"The treatment center helped me get clean," Jessica shared. "But my faith in Jesus Christ is what keeps me in recovery."

Now six years into her recovery, Jessica has regained control of her life and her health. Today she's using her hard-won experience to help women in Yancey County with substance use disorders find their own path to wellness through Toe River Advocates for Community Education and Support (TRACES), a community health initiative sponsored by the Mountain Area Health Education Center (MAHEC) and funded by a two-year grant from The Duke Endowment.

"I wanted to give back to my community and be that support person I didn't have," Jessica shared. "I wasn't sure how to do that until a friend suggested I should become a peer support specialist. I didn't even know what that was. When I looked it up online, I knew that's what I wanted to do."

A peer support specialist is someone in long-term recovery who uses his or her life experience and training to help others find recovery from addiction. Jessica received her 40-hour training through Vaya

Health in Asheville, where she learned more about substance use disorders, the impacts of trauma, recovery support skills, and how to help others overcome stigma. The timing couldn't have been better.

In 2017, she learned that MAHEC was looking for a peer support specialist to support women and children in Yancey County, which has seen three to five unintentional opioid-related deaths every year for the past three years. Western North Carolina ranks among the worst in the state for overdose fatalities and the number of opioid prescriptions written.

In addition to giving talks at community education events, Jessica works closely with women who are struggling with substance misuse. She tries to meet each woman wherever she is in her recovery process.

"If she isn't ready to consider recovery, I share my experience," she explained. "I know how hard it is to quit, especially without support. But I also know what happens if you don't. I almost lost my oldest child. I was arrested. Those were my wake up calls."

Through TRACES, Jessica connects women with whatever resources they need whether that is a compassionate ear, treatment services, parenting classes, long-acting contraception to prevent an unintended pregnancy, or help finding an AA or NA meeting. In sharing her own recovery journey, she also offers hope and proof that recovery is possible.

"Drugs know no boundaries," Jessica shared. "Addiction can affect anyone. It doesn't matter who you are or what kind of family you come from. Anyone can become addicted."

Luckily, peer support doesn't know those boundaries either.

"We want people to know that they can recover from trauma and addiction," explained Idania Garcia, TRACES Program Manager and Yancey County resident. "Recovery is more likely when you have adequate support. That's why we're here—to help our friends and families lead healthier lives."

TRACES peer support services are free. The program also coordinates community education and resiliency training for local organizations through Resources for Resilience, a nonprofit organization that provides effective strategies for caring for people who have experienced trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACES) known to increase the risk for substance use disorders.

In December, TRACES organized opioid town halls in Mitchell and Yancey counties with presentations by MAHEC's Chief Education Officer Blake Fagan, MD, who shared some of the causes of the current opioid epidemic and region-wide efforts to turn it around. More than 60 people participated in the forums including state representatives, county commissioners, law enforcement officers, physicians, health department and social workers, and community members.

This spring, Yancey, Mitchell and Madison county parole and probation officers will be participating in ACES training coordinated by the program.

For more information about peer support services and trauma-focused resiliency training, contact program manager Idania Garcia at Idania.Garcia@mahec.net or 828-774-6000.