



JOHN GRAHAM HOUSING & SERVICES

Food, Shelter, Hope
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www.johngrahamshelter.org

Victoria's Story: Welcome to Damon!

I welcomed my son Damon in February. He was born on Valentine's Day, which was the best Valentine's Day present I ever got. He was 8 pounds, 6.9 ounces. He was 19 1/4" long with a 14" head, born at 7:52 am.

I was a little worried when he was first born because he was not crying. He didn't actually cry until they put a diaper on him.

So for now there's like no sleep at all. He's up most of the night, and I'm learning how to find time to eat. I try to do what I can for myself when I can. I've been taking care of him since day one.



My hope is that he does not follow in my footsteps. I don't want him following my past. It's not the way I would want anyone to live their life. I want him to support himself first

before he can support anyone else. You can't help others if you can't help yourself. I want him to be independent and secure.

"He was born on Valentine's Day, which was the best Valentine's Day present I ever got."

I'm trying to get to know him. He's quite the entertainer. He makes the funniest faces. Physically he's strong, trying to hold up his head. He's like he's already trying to crawl and roll over. He likes to eat and cuddle. It's been supportive for us here at John Graham.

As a first time single mother the support is helpful. Eventually we want to get our own place. I'm feeling confident that I can provide for him the world I want for him.

Road to Recovery: By Marsha Barber

I thought the scariest moment in my life was waking up barefoot and hungover and disoriented in the back of a van in the middle of the Arizona desert. I didn't recognize the driver, but he introduced himself as Mr. Thrillkill. I was rescued by some construction people working on an obscure project, by either chance or divine intervention. That was where my alcoholism had taken me.

But that turned out not to be the scariest moment of my life. That dubious honor goes to the minute I realized I was homeless at age 60.

Given my background, it realistically wouldn't be surprising that I would become homeless. But given the unrelenting drive I had to escape that background (which I successfully pulled off for decades), becoming homeless IS a surprise. And a learning experience. And a humbling experience, And a crappy experience. And sometimes, strangely enough, a beautiful experience.

I was born a product of rape, growing up on welfare and charity and big blocks of government cheese. The house I grew up in with my mother, grandparents and an uncle was vermin-infested, with no running hot water, no heat other than a tiny wood stove, and holes in the floor. My uncle started sexually abusing me when I was 2 years old.

My mother was in and out of mental institutions for my whole life and addicted to a savage cornucopia of prescription medications that left her in a perpetual zombie-like state.



“I was born a product of rape, growing up on welfare and charity and big blocks of government cheese.”

She had attempted suicide when she discovered that she was pregnant with me. It was the late '50s in a small southern town and an illegitimate pregnancy was pretty much the society equivalent of murder.

She lied to me when I was a child and said that the delicate necklace of a scar that snaked across her neck was surgical, the result of removing a benign tumor. But when I accidentally found out the truth when I was an adolescent, that scar reminded me every day that I was not wanted, not supposed to be here, and I felt that way beyond her death from cancer some 20 years ago. Not supposed to be here. I spent my teenage years in alcohol and drug-induced haze. That was my sweet escape then. (Continued on Page 4)

Letter to the Editor

Dear John Graham Staff,

I will never forget the first phone call to John Graham Shelter. It was a call of desperation for myself and my children and it ended in HOPE! I talked with Kate and just that one phone call changed all of our lives for the better. Kate, you gave me hope, something I have not had in so long (at that point in my life).

From that call, people and plans slid into place and my children and I were finally safe and finally free. Peter and Kate were there to welcome Jimmy and I, and the next day Courtney and Chrissy as well. There will never be enough words to really show you all at John Graham how your help has positively changed four lives so drastically. My babies can wake up with hope for a better day. They get to go to sleep knowing and believing they are good kids and deserve love and respect. They no longer live in fear and can continue to grow and change and become better little people.

And I am also able to now become the mother I have always wanted to be. Thank you all from the bottom of our hearts for giving us this chance. I had given up hope, but you all have never given up on me.

Bless you all with this New Year.

Maria



We have a lot of good help here in the office!



Look who got an apartment!

(Road to Recovery, Continued) Later, my raging addiction cost me everything that was ever important to me. It robbed me of my dignity and self respect, perpetuated a string of toxic and eventually violent relationships with men, and both directly and indirectly led me to where I am today: homeless and feeling starkly alone.

Now to the unlikely positive things I accomplished, given my background (audible sigh of relief from readers....)

My first move out of high school was driving my beat-up Chevy Nova, with \$500 in my pocket, from the small Appalachian hamlet where my life was so small and tortured, to L.A. I didn't know a soul there, but almost immediately I had a small apartment and landed enough temp work to survive. But this was not the life that would prove my worth to anyone and I realize now that was (at first subconsciously) the most crucial thing to me. So I applied to college, got a scholarship to UNC-Chapel Hill, and graduated with a B.A. in English. After a brief but meaningful move to San Francisco to take care of my best childhood friend who was dying from AIDS, I chose to go to grad school and graduated with an M.A. in English with a Journalism minor. Nobody in my family had ever gone past 9th grade.

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I became a journalist, beginning as a freelance writer/reporter, and then quickly moving up the ladder from staff writer to arts editor to managing editor at a variety of newspapers from Asheville (100 miles from the town where I grew up) to New Orleans to Boston to San Francisco and several stops in between. I interviewed lots of famous people, including some of my music idols, got backstage passes to all the big concerts, won some awards for my writing. I had arrived and was living the life.

But all the while, I had a sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach. I felt like a fraud, a poser. I still felt like the hillbilly, unwanted bastard child. So I began to get fired from jobs. I was drinking in the morning before important interviews. I was out of hand and out of control, all the time.

Always the wanderer, I eventually landed in Burlington, where I wrote for Seven Days until I couldn't. I went on disability. I moved from town to town, sometimes living in nice apartments, other times living in cheap motels.

Domestic violence was what directly led me to homelessness, leaving an abusive man with just the clothes on my back from a beautiful home I had managed to rent. But my addiction was the root cause. I would never have become involved with a violent man if I hadn't been drunk when we met. I've been to rehab more times than I can count, but it's the John Graham Shelter I credit with saving my life. It doesn't feel like a shelter, it feels like a home. The people here (including the staff) feel like family. Kate, Pete and my caseworker Ellen have supported me through my struggles with sobriety and my at-times deep depression. Even though I have bad days, in my heart I feel I can truly start over.

John Graham Welcomes Ellen Repstead, Clinical Case Manager



I feel passionate about John Graham’s mission. The first thing I noticed when I first arrived was the incredible staff and the supportive working environment.

Being homeless is traumatic enough to begin with, so it’s not surprising that nearly everyone we work with has a medical or a mental health challenge. When a person is in crisis symptoms can go unnoticed or untreated. But because we have a wrap around program we help

people identify these issues and connect them to mainstream resources in the community. People who struggle with physical and mental health issues do face numerous obstacles. For example it’s not practical for someone with social phobias to be asked to take the bus to see a doctor or a therapist. So you arrange transportation. Wait lists and access to care are issues. People just don’t have enough access to providers to get the kind of support they need. We have someone who is ready, willing, and able to begin therapy, but too often there is no one to connect with. So it’s great that we have the capacity to offer some of that support in-house.

This summer I complete my Masters in Social Work with a strong clinical focus and an emphasis on social justice. My studies have provided important skills in motivational interviewing, cognitive behavioral therapy, and play therapy. We have so many children here and I’ve been able to use these skills immediately. For example it’s difficult raising small children in a shelter. I work with a large family and when we get together it gives each of the parents time to play with their children in a positive way. I look for ways to model behaviors, to speak with the child in a way that I’ve suggested is effective, for example, to calm her when she is upset.

“Advocacy with schools is key. The school sees one child; the counselor sees another. When a mother is alone it’s hard to advocate, but when someone is backing you up it can be effective. Mom and I are like wait: this is the child we see. Together we got a lot put in place for him.”

There are 101 reasons that people become homeless, and I’ve noticed the younger folks often lack skills to be independent. I spent 20 years in leadership in public schools and have a Masters in Education. Being able to teach another person skills comes in really handy. I enjoy helping a new mother give her son

his first bath. I'm teaching a woman to build credit. I just started working with another mom in outreach who had a difficult past. We spend most of our time talking about how to be an adult. How do I open a bank account or buy a car? How do I do my taxes? How do I apply for a job? Help me negotiate the system! And from working with seniors, I've learned so much about insurances, benefits, and ways to provide access with community partners. That comes in handy and makes a huge difference.



I love being able to work with whole families. We are in a unique position because we see people in their homes. It's an amazing opportunity to work with both parents and children at whatever capacity they are available for. Advocacy with schools is key. I recently went with a mom to a team meeting. The school sees one child; the counselor sees another. Mom and

I are like wait: this is the child we see. When a mother is alone it's hard to advocate, but when someone is backing you up it can be effective. I was able to say, "I'm a professional. I see him in his home and this is what we are seeing." Together we got a lot put in place for him that way.

I'd have to say that working at John Graham is like nothing else I'd ever experienced. I love the variety of people we work with, and how we are able to come from the place of "what does the person need to move forward."



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