

My name is Joan Vieldhouse. I am a Mental Health Worker (MHW) with JFK Behavioral Health Center. I am also a person with 8 years and 3 months in recovery from substance abuse and mental health issues. As a single mother I had many challenges. I ended up using cocaine at the age of 22. I became addicted very quickly, as most do. I became involved in the criminal justice system a few times for misdemeanor offenses. My life became chaotic and out of control. I went to Chester County prison and lost custody of my two young daughters who were eleven and eight at the time. They refused to allow me to have them on visitation, and this sent me on a downward spiral. My drug use increased. Somewhere along the way I started using Crystal Meth. As long as I thought no one knew what I was doing, I figured I didn't have a problem.

In 2005 I made a sale of ¼ ounce of cocaine to a relative who happened to be wearing a wire. I was not a big time drug dealer. I was only a delivery person in order to get drugs to get high. I was not charged for 3 years after the actual sale. In Pennsylvania at that time, they had 5 years to bring charges for a drug offense. Because of my association with an outlaw motorcycle club, the task force called the "Ice Squad" run by the PA State Police, thought I had information they wanted that I did not have. This was my first and only drug related offense. The county refused to waive the mandatory minimum sentencing.

I could have greatly benefited from a diversion program like LEAD. I spent almost a year in the county system. I was eligible for and recommended for a treatment court, but I was denied. I completed both Intense Outpatient and Outpatient treatment while in the county. Then I received a state sentence of 33-66 months.

Once you become property of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania any programming already completed is not recognized by the Department of Corrections. Once you are taken to state prison you do not receive programming until 6 months prior to your minimum release date. A person needs treatment immediately not in a couple of years down the road, which can be the case depending on your sentence.

While I was in the inpatient program, my parents died 15 days apart in May of 2010. You do not receive help for your grief in the prison setting. I ended up having a mental breakdown and was discharged from the program. Parole slapped me with an eighteen month violation which meant I had to wait to be paroled until after that date and completion of a program again. I wish that a diversion program had been available to me instead of me receiving a felony on my record. I feel that if you need treatment, it should be an option for you at the beginning. Most addicts do not set out to become addicted or become a criminal, let alone get caught and go to prison.

I was released from Muncy in April of 2012 to Gaudenzia DRC on Henry Ave. I met a woman there named June Sorrel who heads up the Educational Department and a man named William Boone, Director of Aftercare at that time. They saw something in me that I didn't. They helped me to research on how I could help other people on their journey. I found an organization called Pro Act (Pennsylvania Recovery Organization Achieving Communities Together). I am a girl from Lancaster County whose parole department dropped me off in North Philadelphia and told me to figure out what I needed to do. I had never heard of Septa. I never knew that such places like Pro Act even existed, let alone had such wonderful recovery support services. I had been looking to find some training for a career that would enable me to help others in Recovery. I went to Pro Act in June of 2012. I went there for a training session. I walked in the door and met a man named Lester DeLoatch, a Certified Recovery Specialist, who worked for Pro Act's Philadelphia Recovery Community Center. He took me in and welcomed me

literally with open arms. I began coming to the Center at every opportunity I could to be out of Gaudenzia. I became a volunteer in July of 2012. From that point on I was on a mission. I saw something wonderful. I saw other people who were in recovery thriving and enjoying life. I came to realize that there was something to this movement of recovery, and Pro Act is definitely the heart and soul of this movement. I volunteered every moment the Center was open. I became a Certified Recovery Specialist, then a Certified Peer Specialist, and then a Mental Health First Aid Instructor for the City of Philadelphia's Department of Behavioral Health. I have earned quite a few credentials. I am now employed full time at John F. Kennedy Behavioral Health at Broad and Arch Streets as a Mental Health Worker. I am also a member of the Vision Team for the Philadelphia Recovery Community Center. This is a very big deal for me. I walked through the doors at 1701 W. Lehigh Avenue a felon, and I became part of something much bigger than I could have ever imagined.

The support from Pro Act and the ongoing programs they provide were a major influence in my successful completion of parole in 2014 and my continued successes today. Their mantra is "How can I help you with your recovery?" They offer Recovery Support Services to anyone who walks in the doors. If we were able to serve offenders before they enter the system and before they receive a record, it could change their lives and their behaviors. They could learn to have a meaningful life without the use of drugs or the need to market them. Most dealers rely on the selling of drugs as a job. Imagine if they could learn how to use those "marketing skills" for something positive with the right support and guidance. The life of an inmate can be just as bad as the life lived on the streets sometimes worse.

Today, I am gainfully employed. I successfully completed State Parole in May of 2014. I have one of my daughters back living with me; I have a house that is mine that I pay for with legally acquired funds. Some days I am still amazed at how far I have come. I do not know that old me anymore. She is a stranger. I feel that the value of a diversion program such as LEAD could have a tremendous effect on our society and the system, but most of all, on those who would successfully complete the program. If we can teach someone a better way to live and show them how it is possible, then we are making an impact on those we serve. Pro Act never called me stigmatized names like: druggie, addict, pathetic. I once wrote a poem about my life, and in it I used the words "from bikers and gangs to handcuffs and chains." This was my reality. That is not the person I am today.

Today I am a person in long term recovery who has been shown a better way of life. The road has not always been easy, but good outcomes require hard work. Pro Act has opened many doors for me and my continued success. In 2008 I went to jail, now here we are in 2016. I get to hang out with people like Dr. Arthur Evans, Dr. Roland Lamb, and Fred Martin, Pro Acts brave and fearless leader. None of this would be possible without the skills, the support, and the guidance that I received at Pro Act.