

## Recovery Spotlight

**“I strive every day to be a better person. I will use my pain to help others” -Shawn Cannizzaro**

This is the story of a lost boy, a boy named Shawn. His aunt always told him that he didn't have a shot in life. She didn't mean any harm in that statement, in fact it would seem that she was right. Shawn wants you to understand why, here is his story of disadvantage, pain, emotions, and triumph over adversity.

Shawn grew up in the projects of Somerville, Massachusetts after moving there at the age of 10 from the projects of Charlestown, Massachusetts. For those of you unfamiliar with this setting, Shawn has painted a picture, “It was full of dysfunction! Most households only had one parent, usually the mother or grandmother. There was constant noise and violence, an ever-growing police presence, drug and alcohol fueled parties, and so much more that makes life challenging for a child. The dumpster always smelled of fire because it was on fire, or one had been extinguished. There were maggots in the trash, cockroaches, and rats the size of small cats.” This wasn't just life for Shawn, it was life for hundreds of children. Children brought into this world in different ways but suffering the same circumstances, these circumstances bonded them to each other.

In Shawn's household, the only food in the fridge were blocks of government cheese, condiments, bread, cereal, and milk bought with the state's assistance. Raised by a single mother, he was one of five children, conceived with four different men. Everyone of the men in his life struggled with addiction, alcoholism, and interactions with law enforcement based on their choices and his mother was no different in her struggles. He never knew his father, but he managed to become the person that he hated most. Shawn has described his childhood as pure hell, although his mother loved him. He knew she loved him, but he never felt loved.

As he grew into a young adult, life became more traumatizing. Those same kids that he was bonded to were disappearing to overdose, suicide, murder or, if they were lucky, they would go to prison. Depression, hatred, bitterness, and self-doubt, these are the words Shawn uses to describe his emotions and the emotions of many others. In trouble, at the age of 12, the first signs that he needed more from the people in his life but not the last.

Today, Shawn is 45 years old and has been arrested 46 times. He has been incarcerated for almost 20 years of his life and been in over 50 fights. Not because he was searching for validation and acceptance but because he was full of fear, anger, and hatred, with no other way of expressing himself. He has been shot, stabbed, and almost died a few times. So, back up to his childhood trouble, 13 years old he was using illegal drugs, nicotine, alcohol, committing crime and engaging in sex. By the age of 19, he was injecting opioids. His uncle would later say that he had become one of the walking dead. A testament to what the future held for Shawn and the harsh reality of his situation. Chaos had become his normal.

Shawn describes the next 25 years of his life, as having gone into a needle. He was using, incarcerated, or in a court mandated treatment program. Every time that Shawn entered a

treatment program, he learned something valuable, but it wasn't enough to help him maintain his recovery, but he did recognize that in the process of ruining his own life, he was ruining others as well. There are choices that he is not proud of, but they have helped shape him into his best self. Shawn abandoned his own 4 children, his mother, sisters, and the rest of his family. Shawn states that his choices have had a hand in ruining every relationship he ever had. In the last treatment program that Shawn attended, the seeds of recovery were replanted, he learned that a childhood friend had opened a recovery home in NH and discovered Narcotics Anonymous (NA).

The seeds may have been planted, but they were slow to grow. Shawn finished the program and moved to Florida, where he relapsed. Shawn overdosed on fentanyl and was found floating face down in pool. He was lucky enough to be found in time to save his life and that is when the seeds began to sprout, a few months later, he left Florida and came to Littleton, NH to reside at White Mountain Recovery Homes. At this point in his life, he was defeated. He hadn't seen his children in years, most people had cut him out of their lives, he was sick with withdrawal. Withdrawal from alcohol, stimulants, and marijuana. He welcomed death. On January 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019, he threatened God, pleaded with him to help change his life. Shawn smoked his last cigarette and surrendered that night. He woke the next day, his mother's birthday, and started a new life.

It has not been an easy life. Shawn states, "I have woken up every day and surrendered over again. I have to fight every day to get the life I want. I find what and who works for me. I had to put myself first over everyone else and sometimes that has been difficult." Today, he is the lead volunteer for the North Country Recovery Support Network, an active member of his recovery community, and works at a Recovery Friendly Workplace. He has been employed there for almost 3 years. His employer has granted him opportunities for advancement, they paid for him to become a trained Recovery Coach. His life is good but not without challenges, he left his employment to become a Behavioral Health Technician, but it didn't work out. He was crushed, but he did not give in. Shawn went back to his employer and got his job back. Shawn acknowledges his life and his recovery depend on how much work he puts into it. In the words of Shawn, "I pray, grind, and hustle every day to be better. It will not stop."

It will not stop, and it doesn't end there. He is working on rebuilding relationships with the people that he has hurt, he has been blessed with a life partner, who is also in recovery, he has fixed his credit, gotten his drivers' license, and resides in his own apartment. All great accomplishments and none of them were easy, but well worth the struggle and work. Today, Shawn and his partner, Melissa, dream of bigger things, of their place in the recovery community. Together, they are working to start their own Recovery Home, to help others with their struggle with addiction. "I want to give other people HOPE. I strive every day to be a better person. I will use my pain to help others. I will lead by example and let people know we do recover. I dragged myself out of the gutter, I welcomed recovery, and you can too"

***"To anyone who reads this, in recovery or not, believe in yourself because you are worth it. If anyone needs help, reach out, there is help available."*** -Shawn Cannizzaro