

Emma Norton Services Human Interest Stories

Chloe

At barely five feet tall, the way in which 20-year old Chloe carries herself exudes the focus and determination of a gymnast once cultivated for the Olympics. Rewind back to Chloe's childhood, and that's exactly where this story begins.

Very early on, elite coaches and trainers saw great potential in Chloe. By kindergarten, she was practicing 4-8 hours every day and loving it. She was thriving in a sport that required the utmost focus and determination. But a dark cloud loomed over her success. Even before her first day of school, she was subjected to frequent sexual and physical abuse at the hands of her father. The abuse escalated when Chloe's father started taking his five-year old daughter to 'parties' with other men and little girls. These children were not brought together to play with dolls or finger paint, but instead were forced to have sex with the men. For the next 11 years, Chloe's young life was reduced to rape and gymnastics.

Mental illness is common in victims of long-term abuse and can manifest in several different diagnoses. By the age of seven, Chloe was diagnosed with anorexia. In a world of chaos, the food Chloe chose to consume or not consume was one of the few things over which she had control. Conditioned by her father's own eating disorder, she learned to eat half an apple a day and to exercise compulsively. Often falsely mistaken for an act of vanity, anorexia is a serious and devastating mental illness. In Chloe's case, in addition to control, it proved to be a tool of survival. Chloe was forced to make awful choices – from starving herself to appear severely underweight so the men would stop hurting her to using her eating disorder to stave off puberty in order to remain on her dad's 'good' side – all while her most difficult choice should have been whether to be a princess or a cat for Halloween.

Eventually, amidst a bitter and family-splitting divorce, Chloe's unwitting mother allowed her father to retain custody of Chloe while she and Chloe's younger siblings moved out of state for a job. During a time she could only say was "really, really bad," the frequency of the child prostitution only increased while Chloe's health rapidly deteriorated. At age 14, she was finally hospitalized for the first time for anorexia. Two more horrible years later, the police were tipped off and her father was arrested. He pitted a prestigious and high-powered team of lawyers against the county prosecutor's case. The defense team twisted Chloe's own therapy records to paint her as a "lying, manipulative slut." When key evidence was ruled inadmissible, the jury was unable to find guilt beyond a reasonable doubt. On the night of the not-guilty verdict, Chloe, now a junior in high school, locked herself in the bathroom and gave serious thought to killing herself. Saved only by the concern for the welfare of her brothers, she instead turned again to the only thing that was reliable and made her feel in control of her own life: anorexia. After the trial, her eating disorder was exacerbated by Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) involving nightmares and flashbacks. In the years that followed, Chloe estimates that she spent more than 650 days in hospitals and various treatment centers. Unfortunately, eating disorders are not a widely-understood mental illness and are many times undertreated, resulting in a revolving door of patients who gain weight in the hospital only to leave and lose it all again. And Chloe was no exception.

On Dec. 2, 2010, everything almost tragically ended. After passing out three times that morning, she dragged herself to her appointment with The Emily Program, a treatment center for eating disorders based in Minnesota. She was quickly rushed to the hospital with dangerously-low blood pressure. On the way to the hospital, Chloe lost consciousness and went into cardiac arrest and multi-organ system failure. Doctors worked on her and repeatedly resuscitated her throughout the day. With a blood pressure dipping as low as 50/20, her family was told she wouldn't make it through the night. She was admitted to the ICU that evening and her family was advised to say their goodbyes.

When she survived the night, the doctors said she would not make it through the week. With sheer determination however, Chloe did make it. But, while Chloe fought to live, she was losing the fight with anorexia. After years of treatment centers and residential programs across the country, the turning point came this past summer when she found support and a safe and healthy environment at Emma Norton Services. Coupled with her continued intensive treatment at The Emily Program, Chloe began to turn things around. Now at a healthy weight, she says she knows that her heart will fail and she will die if she relapses again. The key to her recovery is to not let herself get so overwhelmed that she subsequently seeks control by way of her eating disorder.

Chloe's aspirations have changed now from the Olympics to one day helping people recover from eating disorders. In the meantime, this determined, focused and vibrant woman is taking it one step at a time and building the foundation to achieve a healthy and happy life. She does not know how long her path in treatment will be and she still faces bad days. But through the healing, she's realizing she's had something more powerful than determination or focus this whole time. She has had hope. And with that, this story does not end as one of a life ravaged by malicious abuse, but continues as one of a woman who made the choice to live and the beautiful world of possibilities ahead of her.

Heather

To hear the story of Heather's life, one might think this woman never stood a chance. The first 12 years of her life were riddled with divorce, physical abuse, alcoholics and drug-abusers. The guilt of leaving her siblings behind when her father rescued her weighed on her into adulthood. Pregnant with her first child at 17, she wasn't able to graduate from high school and married at 19. She and her husband had four children and he adopted Heather's first daughter. But slowly, a controlling and abusive husband and father emerged. He rarely hit the kids in front of Heather, instead saving his physical abuse for times when she was gone. In addition, Heather's brother-in-law was supplying the drugs that her husband was selling – and giving to Heather. For two years, she was hooked on crank (a low purity, crystallized Methamphetamine) until her brother-in-law saw the physical toll it was taking and refused to sell through her husband. Having lost his 'job,' her husband simply sat at home while Heather worked, cared for the kids, cleaned the house and cooked the meals. "I hated my life," she recalls. "I told the kids all the time 'I'm going to leave,' but I didn't know how." Then, in early 2009, her then-15-year old daughter went to the police at school and told them she'd been violently raped by her stepfather for the past 10 years. Heather's life started on a downward spiral, hitting meth and pills on the way down. She lost her job after missing too many shifts while testifying in court for her daughter and then lost her kids after her addictions were discovered. "I was so depressed not knowing how to handle what happened to my baby. I started using hard and started

running the streets.” Before long, Heather found out she was pregnant. She was so miserable and at that time she didn’t care about a thing, but she found the strength to stop using and seek refuge at her cousin’s house. Her twin daughters were born healthy, but premature and were immediately taken by child protection. After two weeks back on the streets, Heather had an epiphany. “Everyone’s bottom is different” Heather said, referring to the day she called her dad from the streets and said, ‘I need help.’ “I just want to do right. For my whole life, it wasn’t right.” She was admitted to the inpatient program at St. Joseph’s, calling those 18-days “ the best decision I ever made.” From there, she spent five months in two different programs working on her recovery, the 12 Steps, building a sober network and reaching out to every resource she could find to line up housing as that was the first necessary step to reuniting with her kids. When Emma’s Place accepted her last September, she was elated. In the next two months, six of her kids came home (her oldest daughter remained with Heather’s father), this time to a safe, sober, stable environment. While there are still rocky times and her children are still recovering from the trauma, the kids have transitioned nicely – making loads of friends and doing well in school. Her oldest daughter is a straight-A student and is attending college in the fall. Heather is working with a team of people including the staff at ENS, her probation officer and child protective services to continue getting ahead and moving forward. She’d love to go to school to be a chemical dependency counselor or a social worker. She wants to help people find the necessary resources for help in recovery for which she had to search and dig to find.

Today, Heather reflects on how close she was to losing her kids and is committed to staying at Emma’s Place for as long as it takes to become self-reliant and build the life she always wanted for herself and her kids. She is thankful that she hit rock bottom before she lost forever the seven people she loves more than anything in the world. But more importantly, she never lost herself. Now, after a life a without a chance, it’s Heather’s dreams, determination and strength that have given her a chance.

Roxy

Meet two different women. The first is a street savvy, hardened felon who's been arrested more times than she can count. Beaten and emotionally assaulted daily by an older sister, she learned early on to swallow her feelings and use a scowl to ward off the world. She nearly died after a knife fight and knows she's alone in the world.

The second is a vibrant and charismatic college graduate, raising her son together with her ex-partner. She has a supportive and caring group of friends and family, is extremely resourceful and works hard to reach her goals. She works as an audio engineer and goes out of her way to help those in need.

Would you believe these two vastly different individuals are actually the very same woman? The difference that two years, the desire for a change and a ton of hard work can make is truly

staggering. Roxy is living proof of that.

“Something had to give,” Roxy said, “I was either going to die in a suicide-by-cop situation or I was going to change my life.” And with that, Roxy stepped into Emma Norton Services and asked for help.

For thirty years, Roxy proved to be a survivor. She used whatever tools were available to her to survive. From using alcohol at age nine to survive the cruelty of the sibling left in charge, to resorting to living in vacant homes in the dead of winter to stay warm, Roxy survived. She survived addiction. She survived prison. She survived homelessness. She survived abuse. She kept on simply enduring anything life threw in her path until she couldn't do it any longer. When another sister, who was also Roxy's best friend, and her long-time canine companion both died within two months of each other, she said, “The way I view life changed.” She realized she didn't like life anymore. She didn't like the people around her, what she was doing, or that she was getting arrested all of the time. She had reached the proverbial fork in the road and just weeks after her son's eighth birthday, Roxy sobered up and set out to change her life.

Today, more than two years later, Roxy counts ENS among the pillars of her new life. “I wouldn't be where I am today if I wasn't at ENS. I graduated from college, I earned a scholarship, I have the best job in my field of study, my mind is healthy...and I'm just happy.” In addition to the safe environment and the family of staff and residents, she cites the resources and support at ENS as a large part of her success. “There is help here for any problem.” Her case manager recently found a way for her to earn the money needed to acquire a copy of her birth certificate for employment.

Roxy's next feat is to see the world while working on tour with a band. In the meantime, while she continues to work on her own stability, she's signed on to mentor others as they start working towards sobriety. With her drive, compassion and charisma, there's no doubt Roxy will continue to achieve every goal she sets.

Natalie

Some folks were first introduced to Natalie as she debuted on the cover of *Response Magazine* (Like us on Facebook to find a link to the article), while others may have met Natalie through her advocacy work. As a volunteer with TakeAction Minnesota, a grassroots organization dedicated to making change in the community, Natalie has been working to close the job disparity gap. The gap is an issue often associated with race and, unfortunately, Minnesota is the leader in the nation for the widest racial job disparity gap. Natalie knows firsthand the difficulties that follow a person with a record. Even after years of hard work and sobriety, the DWI conviction from 2008 continues to cast a shadow over many opportunities. Natalie is

working closely with TakeAction Minnesota to talk with Target Corporation, a leader in the Twin Cities, to change their policy that currently disqualifies job applicants with a criminal record. Many companies in Minnesota have similar policies and job applicants like Natalie, who once worked for Target, wouldn't be considered for an interview today under the current policy. "I'm not applying to operate a vehicle, I understand that there are certain things I wouldn't be able to do because of my DWI, but right now, I wouldn't even be able to work as a cashier, and I don't understand that rationale," she said. "We are just asking Target to look at applicants on a case-by-case basis as opposed to lumping all of us together and we are hoping, if Target is a leader in taking action, other companies would follow." Natalie and TakeAction Minnesota are encouraged that Target has agreed to a private meeting. "Part of what I learned at ENS was to stand up for myself and to step forward to make changes for the better in my community."