

People used to tell me that giving was more rewarding than receiving. But once I started using alcohol and drugs in my early teens, my vocabulary reduced to “Gimme, gimme.” I started on a road to nowhere and no one cared. Not even me. I wanted more and more but ended up with nothing. The seeds of my addictive behaviours were planted early, though I had no idea it was happening. By the time I was twelve, my home life in Montreal was dysfunctional. My mother had been a single parent for eight years by that time. For the first six years, we had our ups and downs, but she managed to hold things together for my two brothers and me. Then, literally and figuratively, she was all over the place. She couldn’t pay the rent so we stayed in an apartment only long enough for the eviction notice to be enforced, usually about three months. We moved so often we barely had time to unpack. There was no food in the house, no new clothes or shoes or school supplies. I remember coming home one day after school, so hungry. I opened the fridge and found only a dried up piece of ginger. Yet Mom always had wine and weed; she stopped caring about anyone or anything else. I just wanted stability—and food. I got it by leaving.



Remnants/Survivors by Sarah Mosher

I stayed with friends at first and often met my basic needs—food, clothes, toiletries—by shoplifting. Soon needs became wants. I wanted more clothes, better clothes, name brands, the best brands. I thought these things would make me an achiever. I wanted all the time—and I got what I wanted without paying for it. I didn't end up on the streets, at least not until I was about forty years old. I found an apartment with a young couple and continued to go to high school often enough to keep the authorities off my back. I was six months pregnant at graduation. After I had my daughter, we moved to Toronto as I knew my French would be an asset in finding work. I'd left my baby's father and so, like my own mother, I was a single parent. I found work in Toronto—but I also found crack/cocaine and developed a habit I would keep for twenty-eight years. During those years, I travelled around the country and the world, wreaking havoc in all my relationships and committing crimes on an ever larger scale. I needed money for the poison I inhaled into my bloodstream and shoplifting would no longer cut it. I started importing. I threw in a bit of fraud. I felt shame and regret only when I got caught, which I often did. During my twenties, I also

gave birth to three boys. I then had four children, all of whom I neglected on a regular basis to make ends meet and to have my substances. My daughter suffered the most. She was old enough to witness, if not understand, my bizarre behaviour. I would often leave my kids with my mother when I went off to import and when I was incarcerated. I knew it wasn't a healthy environment for them but thought it was better than being with me.

I tried to slow down after my boys were born and actually managed seven good years. I moved to Jamaica with the kids. It felt like home and I found the man of my dreams. The children did well. I got married. Things were stable. But even though I wasn't using crack/cocaine, my addictive behaviour was still very present. It lingered in the background of our lives and in the back of my mind. Every once in a while, I would allow it to come forward and go off for a weekend to smoke crack. But mostly, as always, I chased the money. I got involved in telemarketing scams and travelled back and forth to Canada many times. A rift formed in my relationship with my husband, and when we eventually split apart, drugs took over my life again. I did not want to feel. I would not return to reality for fourteen years.

During this time, I did so many things—and so many things were done to me—that I could never list all of them here. When my money ran out and I had nothing left to sell, I sold myself. I lived and worked as a prostitute on the streets of Jamaica and went to jail there several times. One night, I refused to have sex with a man because he couldn't pay. He tried to kill me by stabbing me in the head.

But the worst, the most excruciating pain, was yet to come.

My kids had moved back to Canada and were living with my brother. Eventually, I moved back too but I didn't see them much; I didn't want to see anyone. I served time for crimes I'd committed before leaving the country and then went back to shoplifting to pay for more drugs. When my boys started to get into trouble, I felt guilty about being such a worthless mother—but only when I wasn't high. Like me, the boys were drawn to fast money like magnets. My second son, Devon, started a street gang when he was sixteen. He handled guns; sold drugs. When he was eighteen, he was shot dead by drug dealers.

I would love to tell you that my son's death woke me up, that I stopped using, got clean. But that would be a lie. He was murdered in 2008. My recovery came six years later.

In late April of 2014, I found myself back in jail. My lawyer, the crown, and the judge recommended that I go to rehab. It would be my third stint. I figured I had nothing to lose but I also sensed some sort of shift or awakening—my "moment," as I would later learn in the 12-step fellowship. I had been to AA meetings in the past and found they held no interest for me but I knew I had to try again. I had to open my mind to possibilities. I started going to 12-step meetings at the rehab facility—Alcoholics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, and Narcotics Anonymous—and started to take their suggestions seriously. Service was one of their first recommendations. It made sense. Most of the people I knew who'd remained abstinent were involved in service. Some had even started within a day of being clean. So when I got home from rehab, I volunteered to help within my 12-step groups.

Soon afterwards, I was invited by the NA Hospitals and Institution Committee to share my story at another rehab in Montreal. The residents were so enthralled, so inspired, that when a volunteer coordinator position at that rehab facility opened up, I was nominated. The position involved organising weekly speakers. I knew other addicts at the facility depended on me. I couldn't mess up.

Finally, I felt accountable. And that's how it started for me: I realised I could help others. I have been clean since May 1, 2014. The 12-step literature says that once we are on a solid road of recovery, we should also do service in our communities; we should give back to society for the help we have received and for the damage we have caused. I've had my share of both so for the past few years I've shared my story at 12-step meetings, rehab facilities, and outreach programs. I've encouraged people to seek out 12-step fellowships; some do and stay; others don't. I've also taken a volunteer position at the local Y in Montreal where I greet guests, swipe their pass, and direct them to various locations and activities. Mostly, I've been available to support addicts as they find a new way of life.

I remember when a young woman contacted me early one Saturday morning. She had been to my talk and reached out because she was having suicidal thoughts. I talked her through things; told her there is always hope. She asked me to be her 12-step sponsor and she's over nine months clean today. I am so proud of her.

I now sponsor six women in the fellowship and support many others who call or text me daily. I never say no to speaking engagements and hope to one day do this work for a living. My biggest dream for the future is to offer community service in Devon's name. I'd like to open "Devon's Place," a house for women who want to stop using drugs and have nowhere to go after leaving jail or rehab. This would be the ultimate service position for me: giving women a chance leave the deepest, darkest place and start a new life.

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