

PAMELA (WITH JAMES)

I feel like we were making bad choices and continued to go back and forth from using and not being able to hold down a job, we screwed things up along the way. You know, not paying for our rent or not paying our utilities, which causes you to have utility bills and then you can't get utilities. You go from having your own place, then you're bunking with somebody, and then you are living in abandoned houses.

And when you get to a point where you're just tired of being tired, then, that's what brought us to restart. The stigma of people going to shelters, you know, we didn't want to do it, but actually kind of being forced into it was the best thing that ever happened to us. Being here and being made to be accountable for ourselves and our actions allowed us to start doing things in our life that were right. For instance, having a curfew, or making sure the kids go to bed on time so they can get up for school. Making sure they do their homework, get baths, all those things that we were neglecting to do before they were helping us to do for them. So, once you do that for so long, it becomes a routine.

After that, you can start building off of that. We ended up starting to feel better about ourselves and we applied for some jobs. There was a program called "Boots on the Ground" and reStart oversaw that program, and James was able to get a job with them. That started him on a journey to actually working for MODOT. I have a dual diagnosis. I have substance abuse issues and I also have mental health issues. I went to vocational rehab and got a job coach and they helped me to get a job as a certified Missouri Peer Support Specialist, which I am in medical center at the time I was chairman. So that started my journey of starting to help people who had been in the same situation as myself.

I worked at a program called Prime Time. It was a drop in center for people with mental illness, but about 80% of it was made up of people who were homeless. They would be able to identify with me because I was actually still in a shelter at the time. So, you know, you start really feeling good about yourself whenever you're able to help people who you can help get out of the same situation you were in. And when you're able to show them, then it inspires them. We ended up being there for two years and then we started paying 30% of our income. We went into supportive housing and we were with them until our income exceeded the guidelines. We ended up getting our own place and two years in a row there was a program called I believe, "Reconstructing Futures", where every Christmas they would give a home away to somebody who had come up out of homelessness, who was able to pay their bills, keep their utilities on, and manage taxes and insurance and stuff like that.

Things that we hadn't thought about before. The first year we didn't get it, which was okay. The second year we wrote a story about ourselves and reStart also wrote something about us and we entered it again and ended up getting it. That was a surreal moment because you think to yourself that you never have to worry about being homeless again. It was something that somebody couldn't take away from us. As long as we continued to do the things that we were supposed to do. For seven years we had an overseer over the property and we paid them \$300 a month and out of that money they paid our taxes, insurance and security system out in the home.

After seven years, the home became ours free and clear because we showed them that we were able to do these things and continue to make good choices. The home has been you know, it's always been our home this entire time, but just not being underneath anybody anymore. It's ours. And, you know, I just feel like we have something now to leave our kids. Our kids don't have to worry about a place to live, you know. I just want people to know that even when you feel like you can't do it, you can. Just keep putting one foot in front of the other until your body catches up.

The hardest thing about being homeless, I think for me was not so much myself, but my kids. Dragging them to things that they had no business being part of. Sometimes we didn't have electricity and we would have to eat things that were out of a can, you know, I don't know. You don't have the money to wash your laundry so you're washing it out in the tub. Just knowing that somebody is going to come put you out of the house any day because you haven't paid the rent. I think the hardest part was not knowing what was going to happen the next day. You're living moment to moment. And it's not a way to live and especially not to put your kids through. I think my kids saw too much. Kids deserve to have stability.

I think the hardest thing for us was, basically we had done so much damage to ourselves because James was in trouble with the law. You can't get housing if you're a felon. And I had like \$4,000 worth of utility bills. So you have to try to find a place that is all utilities paid because you can't afford to pay for the utilities. I think that all the obstacles that were in our way, it looked like we were never going to get there. But you just keep plugging away and eventually you are there. We had a great support system.

I am still in contact with a lot of the people that helped us along the way. I know that I can reach out to them and if I need them, they'll be there.

I think the most important thing in life is to not take things for granted. Be in the moment, basically. The small things are the big things, you know. I remember just wishing I could watch anything on TV because we didn't have electricity and my son would read to us every night and he would read to us so we fell asleep because it would get dark and we didn't have any more light. And so that's how we would go to bed every night. I just think

sometimes you go through bad things, but it forces you to become closer and it makes you appreciate the small things. Even making sure that they had breakfast, lunch and dinner. That was the main thing. And being out of the cold. When we first entered the program, it was November 28 and it was cold. I remember it was really cold and we were all sleeping in the same bed under the blankets so that we could keep each other warm. And coming here, we were just so grateful to have someplace warm and we were together and the kids could eat and they didn't have to worry about clean clothes and, I think, just appreciate the tools that you're given to, you know, get on your feet.

My dream would be that I really wish that everybody could work together to help everybody get out of these situations. I feel like everybody has something to give and I think if people were more willing to give, then a lot of people wouldn't be in this situation. You need someone to help you be there for you. You got to think about even people that have never been through homelessness. They've been through something and they needed someone to be there for them to help them along the way. So, whatever it is for whoever, you know. For me, it was a big spiritual thing. I don't think that I would have made it without God either.

Being with my family, we still come back here every year, trick or treating here and stuff. We still come here and do Easter egg hunts with them. I try to participate in other things because I'm on the other side now and I want to show other people that are just coming in or that feel like giving up or that you're not going to be here forever. Things change.

Home to me? Yeah. Someplace safe, some place where you can breathe, relax. You know, I remember being on the bus one time, and we didn't have anywhere to go. I remember this lady and her child were arguing back and forth. I remember they were like, as soon as we get home, you're going to eat dinner or whatever. I remember thinking to myself, what I wouldn't give to have a home, you know? I feel like it's somewhere you can relax and breathe, you can take a warm shower or sleep if you want to. You don't have to get up and I think that those are big deals, you know?

Remember that what you're going through today is not going to be what you're going to do tomorrow just because you think that it's so hard. You can't turn things around. You can. Things are always changing and change is good. If you can try, you don't have to look so far ahead. Give yourself a small goal. And when you get there, give yourself another goal and eventually you'll turn around and you'll be there. I want everybody to know there is hope and reach out and ask for help. If you're willing to put in the work, you'll get there.