

Guiding the lost back home: Jenna Kavenagh gives hope from experience

By Karrie Carlson, Daily Journal Media, Lake Country Living, Oct. 21, 2023

Life doesn't always turn out the way you had planned. There are always detours, wrong turns and dead ends. What makes the difference is your outlook and what you do with the situations you are faced with. Jenna Kavanagh knows first hand that getting to your destination isn't always a straight road.

Growing up in West Fargo, Jenna was involved with her church and her family. "I had a good upbringing in a middle class family, like many of my friends," she said.

A girl once involved in basketball and school, when entering 11th grade she was looking to find herself and her independence. She quit basketball, started hanging out with older friends, skipped school frequently and began experimenting with alcohol. It made a big impact on her life and changed what she had always thought her high school experience would look like. "I ended up having to go to the alternative school half way through my senior year in order to graduate with my class," she explained. What started out as a means to an end, was just what she needed. Her grades improved. She joined the student council and graduated with big plans for her future.

She started her college education in Fergus Falls, but that was short-lived. After not attending classes or having her priorities in line with a successful college career at the time, she withdrew from school and moved back to West Fargo. She regrouped and began studying again the next semester, eventually earning her bachelor degree in criminal justice. She was achieving at school and working at the Moorhead Juvenile Detention Center throughout her schooling, but there was something else going on behind closed doors.

"In college is kind of where it started, when I was drinking a lot, yet it was not affecting my school or life," Jenna explained. "I eventually started hiding my bottles of whiskey in the bathroom and was not making the best choices when it came to drinking and driving." She became an expert at hiding one part of her life that was spiraling out of control, while keeping it all together at school, work and in her relationships. She was able to do this for a while, but it would continue to progress.

2009 saw Jenna hitting all of the highlights one can imagine in life. She was married and things were only getting better. "We were homeowners, both worked and had a normal life," she said. Her ability to conceal her secret life of alcohol abuse was beginning to get harder. The drinking increased. She hid more bottles. She eventually went to detox for the first time in 2013.

Jenna's cycle of drinking and detoxing continued and escalated a little more each time around. Her family began to witness the severity of her addiction and urged her to get help. By 2014, she went into inpatient treatment and tried to get to the root of the disease. Things were looking up. After getting sober and doing the necessary work to get through the program, Jenna and her husband found out she was pregnant. Their son, Kasyn, was born the next spring. "He was my light and joy when he was born in March 2015," she said.

"A mother should be excited to have someone they always prayed for right in front of them," she continued, "and I was, for a short time." When Kasyn was six weeks old, Jenna began drinking again. She ended up right back at the place she had gotten so far from. That's the nature of the disease. It never goes away.

"My old drinking habits went right back to where they were and drinking from morning to night was a normal way of life again," she explained. She went back to inpatient treatment. This cycle repeated itself over the next two years, totalling three stays in inpatient treatment, four outpatient treatments and six visits to detox.

In March 2016, as Kasyn turned one year old, Jenna was served divorce papers. She was also issued a protection order on her son. She had been drinking around him and driving intoxicated with him in the vehicle. The depression that came from the decisions she was making only fueled the urge to drink to deal with the pain.

She had a DWI arrest in April 2016, while on her way to a court-appointed parenting class as part of her divorce. Her body was physically shutting down from the alcohol and a life expectancy of three months was given to her if she didn't turn it around. Yet another drink was always justifiable because she would tell herself, "I will quit tomorrow." She spent a night in jail, and a month later was back there again after violating her alcohol monitor order.

She was a college-educated mom and successful business woman, now finding herself so far off the path she had intended to take. "I now had no marriage, no son in my life daily, no job, no license, living in my parents basement, no house and no trust from my family," Jenna said. From that low point, a small light that would end up changing her life peeked through.

Jenna was able to get into the Otter Tail County DWI Court program for 18 months, which allowed her to still participate in her daily life while cleaning up some of the chaos she had caused. She stayed sober. She got licensed as a substitute teacher. She began speaking to schools and at law enforcement events. She attended conferences and MADD monthly. She shared her story over and over, healing a little more each time. She also started facilitating AA meetings at the OTC jail. After two years, she felt a shift. "This was my awakening to what I was meant to do," she said. She went back to school, a decade after earning her degree, and became a licensed alcohol and drug counselor.

In 2020, Jenna proved to everyone, but more importantly to herself, that your past mistakes do not define who you are destined to be. Almost not graduating from high school, going to college, having to withdraw from college, starting a journey to her degree, trying to overcome addiction, getting married, sinking further into alcoholism, having her son, losing it all, putting in the work, humbling herself and finally coming out stronger than ever, with enough love to help those around her find the peace she has found.

Jenna now works at Nystrom and Associates in Fergus Falls as a clinical supervisor of addiction services. She assists her caseload of clients participating in intensive outpatient treatment. Her intense compassion for those she sees fighting the same battle she knows so well has led her to more opportunities to help other addicts than she could've ever imagined while sitting in a jail cell years ago.

"I am the treatment provider on the Otter Tail County Drug Court programs, a board member of the Lake Region HalfWay House and recently was asked to be on the Opioid Settlement Advisory Counsel for Otter Tail County." On top of all of that, Jenna continues to share her story hoping to connect with even one person and show them they aren't alone.

"I never, in a million years, would have thought I had to go through what I did to be here today working in this field" she said. "These clients are my reason. The people who have nothing, the people who others have no faith in and are hurting are like gold to me." It's in remembering her own rock bottom that Jenna is able to boost others to reach for their own recovery.

"Nothing changes if nothing changes. I think my biggest mission is to push clients to see they are worth it and their mistakes do not define them, but make them who they are today."

It is a frightening feeling when you feel lost. The dead ends and unknown roads can lead away from where you want to be. A guide, a navigator, a map — Jenna has been that to countless people who thought they'd never find their way home. She has not only given them hope that there is a way to get back on their feet, but she walks with them and encourages them until they can stand on their own.