

FOUR STORIES OF LIVES TRANSFORMED



“I was doing everything I knew to get out of poverty. But to my shock, it became apparent that I really knew very little about any other economic class other than my own.”

***—Rebecca Lewis-Pankratz,
McPherson, Kansas***



I was raised in poverty, and at age 16, I dropped out of high school and left home with a boyfriend. That began a 13-year period of drugs, alcohol and an abusive relationship. We moved from Kansas to Texas to Tennessee to Arkansas to Oklahoma.

At age 29, I finally left the boyfriend who was then my husband. Soon after I left, I realized I was pregnant. Thinking of my newborn son and his future, I started college and a job.

I was still struggling with alcohol on and off and with relationships that didn't last. I had another son and then another. Financial aid helped with tuition, but to make ends meet, I worked as a janitor at my college and as an art instructor for kids. In 2010 when my financial aid ran out, I took a third job as a bartender to cover my final years of tuition.

During that time, I stopped by a church that I frequented to receive free diapers. I told the kind lady who handed out the diapers how much those diapers meant to me and how someday I was going to finish school, claim a better life for my kids, and return to give back. She pointed to a flyer about a class called Circles that helps people get out of poverty.

I thought, “What are these people going to teach me about poverty that I don't already know?” Then I thought, “I've gotten so many diapers from this lady that I better sign up!” So I did.

I was doing everything I knew to get out of poverty. But to my shock, it became apparent that I really knew very little about any other economic class other than my own. I learned I was a master at putting out fires but inept as to how to keep them from igniting.

In 2011 I entered Circles scared, broken, exhausted and suspicious of the program. But I left that first night with hope and was able to admit how alone and vulnerable I had been all those years.

When I started Circles my boys were 9, 5 and 2,

and we lived in a trailer with broken windows, holes in the floor, and a faulty water heater. I owned a car, but it was always breaking down. I was at work or at school five or six nights each week, which meant dragging my kids home late in the evening from the babysitter. My school-aged kids struggled with behavior issues. And I felt like a failure as a mother.

Twelve weeks later, I graduated from Circles training. I committed to attend weekly meetings for 18 months. And classmates and I were matched with middle-class “Allies,” who became our friends.

Everything in my life started falling into place. My name came up for a housing voucher, and we left the trailer park. A friend helped me find a dependable car. And that year, 2012, I became the first person in my family to graduate from college.

I received a paid, part-time position helping with Circles, and the church that housed our Circles office asked me to be the outreach coordinator for the diaper and food ministry. The first time I went to Walmart and filled up the cart with diapers, I could not stop the tears from streaming down my face. I had become the kind lady who helps moms like me.

I set long-term goals with my Allies. I wanted to get my teeth fixed. Thirteen appointments and \$1,700 later, I reached that goal. I wanted out of poverty. In early 2014, I was hired as a full-time Circles coach. I was working three jobs at the time, but with this new position, I was finally making enough to officially leave poverty. My third goal was to buy a home. Looking back, I estimated that I had moved 71 times.

In 2016, I remarried. In 2017, I landed a great job directing student services and poverty issues at a large educational consulting company. Today, my boys are 15, 12 and 9. Our household income is \$120,000 per year. And, yes, we own a home.

Sometimes I'll hear a little voice in my head that says, “Rebecca, you're not poor anymore.” It's almost unbelievable.

“I’m very happy with my life. It’s a confidence boost to do what many women can’t do: I got my life together without a man.”

***—Lola Flores,
Newaygo, Michigan***



The reason I didn’t grow up in poverty was that my mom had a husband with a good job. But my mom struggled with alcohol, and sometimes when she wasn’t around, her boyfriend would abuse me. This went on for years, and I was 11 before I fully understood what was happening and spoke out. When I did, he went to prison, and we lost everything. At age 12, I tried to commit suicide twice and was hospitalized both times.

Desperate for attention, I ended up partying in high school. It felt like my life was a tornado, and I didn’t know how to stop it. I became pregnant just before I turned 17 and ended up dropping out of school. It was my senior year.

At 18, I moved to Grand Rapids hoping to start a new life with my baby girl. I lived with my cousin, watching her kids while she worked. I hated men because of the abuse I had endured as a child, and yet I felt like I needed a man in my life in order to feel loved. Babysitting each day, I felt like I was missing out on life so I started going out with friends. I began a relationship with a new guy, moved in with him, and became pregnant.

I was 19 when my son was born, and I struggled with postpartum depression. My relationship with my son’s father ended, and I began a 5-year period of working part-time but never having stable housing. The kids and I moved from my mom’s house to a boyfriend’s house, to a boyfriend’s mom’s house to my sister’s house.

I moved in with a new boyfriend after getting pregnant once again, but unfortunately, this relationship was abusive. He would physically hurt me, and I was unkind with the words I used. I feared my kids would be injured, so we’d leave only to try again later. All I ever wanted was a happy family, but the cycle of abuse, apology and forgiveness kept repeating. My life was a mess.

I earned money working for a Realtor, cleaning houses after people had been evicted. I also helped my mom clean houses and office buildings. My

brother got me a job planting onions and then sorting and bagging onions. I kept working but never earned enough to have my own apartment.

Eventually, my aunt took us in. When I was filling out an application for free Christmas toys for my kids, there was a flyer for Circles. Hearing it was an 18-month program scared me, but my aunt encouraged me and pointed out that the Circles meetings included dinner and childcare. At first I would attend but sit alone. Then I warmed up to it.

My aunt was my ally, and Circles gave me more “Allies,” who, like my aunt, were positive and offered different perspectives. Circles taught me how to speak up for myself and how to ask for a raise. I also learned how to process my thoughts. When my thoughts get out of control, I write them out in the form of goals, and it removes the stress.

It was tough and embarrassing to talk about my past. Now I talk about my life with tears, yes, but with the thought of “thank God I’m not that person anymore.” I’ve gained parenting skills. I know how to budget. My kids are only 11, 9 and 4, but I’m already teaching them about credit.

I’ve also learned how to set goals. I started with short-term goals, such as saving \$20 a week, and achieving my short-term goals put me in the mood to set long-term goals. My long-term goals included paying off some debt to fix my credit score. My goals included getting my own place for me and my kids where I could pay my own bills, keep insurance on my car, and get ready for homeownership. I’ve accomplished all of these goals, and in early 2019, I plan to start the process of purchasing my own home.

I’m now 28 and work full-time for a financial services company in the accounting department. I earn about \$24,000 per year after taxes, so I’m still eligible for food stamps and healthcare. But I pay for rent and childcare. I’ve been in Circles for 18 months, and I plan to stay in it a bit longer. I’m very happy with my life. It’s a confidence boost to do what many women can’t do: I got my life together without a man.

***“I never thought I’d see the day when
I’d be clean for seven years.
But my life now is so worth it.”***

***—Hiedi Johnson,
Clearfield, Utah***



I grew up in poverty in Ogden, Utah. I was one of six kids. My dad worked in machine maintenance. My mom worked at a gas station and later as a waitress. Still, we lived on food stamps in a house beyond repair. The kitchen didn’t have much of a ceiling; we had to bring out buckets when it rained.

At 16, I left home, dropped out of school because I was pregnant, and moved in with my boyfriend. I tried methamphetamines as a way of losing weight after my pregnancy and became addicted. I had four children within four years, and at different times, I lost custody of all of them.

I went back to school and earned my high school diploma at age 22. When the relationship with my boyfriend ended, I moved back home with my parents and tried to start over. But when I got together with some old friends, I started using meth again. I ended up marrying someone who supplied me with the drug. But it didn’t last as I was trying to stop using and trying to regain custody of my youngest.

My drug addiction ended when I met James in the fall of 2010. James said, “Meth or me?” and I chose him. We were married the following summer.

James grew up all over the country. His mom worked for the government, and his dad and the stepfathers who followed all worked in the military. Despite being born with two club feet, James always had a job after high school, working as an electrician or a carpenter in residential construction. He was married for a while and had two sons. As an adult, he lived in Virginia, New Jersey and Georgia before moving here to Utah.

James and I had been married for a couple of years, and he had a good job working as a robot technician when the pain in his ankles grew so unbearable he could hardly walk. An orthopedic surgeon found the cartilage in both ankles was nearly gone, and surgery was required. James lost his job because it took two years to recover from the surgeries. He found a part-time, minimum-wage job, but it

wasn’t enough to cover the bills.

For two years, we were living paycheck to paycheck. We assumed we were stuck in poverty. We put carpet over the holes in the floor of our trailer, and each month we had to choose a different bill to pay because we couldn’t afford all of them. The medical bills piled up.

A friend at church told me about a brand new program he was involved with called Circles, and I figured it couldn’t hurt. I knew that if we went to Circles, we’d at least get a hot meal each week.

The more James and I went to Circles, the more we learned. Speakers came in and talked about repairing credit. Our classmates became our friends. And James and I were assigned an Ally named Jason, who is the most wonderful person.

Jason helped us fix our credit, which had been destroyed by debt from medical bills, a vehicle that was repossessed, and outstanding utility payments.

What seemed impossible was possible. And James and I set goals, such as putting aside money for a home and a car and saving for emergencies.

During this time, James got a great job as a machine operator making parts for aircraft at an aerospace corporation. We were in Circles for about two years when we officially crossed over the poverty line, earning 200% of the Federal Poverty Level Guidelines. While this marked our graduation from Circles, we were asked to return as volunteer Allies. We want to serve others the way Jason had served us. James can’t attend the Circles meetings because he works a second shift, but I go and plan to continue volunteering as long as Circles is here.

We purchased our first home this year, and my husband got the car he’s been dreaming about: a turbocharged Nissan Altima.

I never thought I’d see the day when I’d be clean for seven years. But my life now is so worth it. I’m married to my best friend. My youngest, who is 16, lives with us. And I get to raise my son’s 1-year-old son.



CIRCLES USA

“There’s so much support. It’s a ‘push’ support. They want to see you succeed. They want to see you reach your goals.”

***—DeShawn Daniels,
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania***



I was born and raised in Pittsburgh, the second of four kids. And while we grew up in subsidized housing, I didn’t notice we were living in poverty—my mom never showed the struggle. She always had a job. We had a supportive stepdad who was a constant presence in our lives. And we went on outings as a family. I was practically a teenager before I learned we received food stamps.

I completed high school and the U.S. Army Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC). At 19, I received rental assistance, moved out, and started working full-time at a childcare center earning \$6.25 per hour. I had a boyfriend and was shocked when he became physically violent. I had never experienced anything like that growing up. Threats from him forced me to move back home.

Still working, I ventured out on my own again at age 24. I got an apartment and a new boyfriend. At age 25, I had a baby girl. When my daughter turned 2, I started college for nursing, but I couldn’t make it work between my job, going to school, studying, and getting her to and from daycare each day. After two semesters, I dropped out but later completed a certified nursing assistant (CNA) program, which helped me get a job at an adult rehab center.

During the next 10 years, I had two sons and continued to work full-time, supporting three kids. I was earning too much money to receive food stamps but was unable to save any money. I had no hope of owning a home until I was invited to a homeownership class, a class that led to Circles.

About five years ago, many families living in the East Liberty neighborhood were displaced and moved into Section 8 housing to make room for a new development. I was one of six people eligible for a program that helps single moms become homeowners. I was in this program when Circles first began in Pittsburgh, and my initial reaction to Circles was no, I didn’t need more meetings. But Circles included childcare and a meal each week, so I agreed to attend.

At the first Circles meeting, I wanted to leave be-

cause it seemed the others in my class were struggling with issues much worse than mine. I didn’t talk during the first two meetings, but by the third or fourth meeting, I started opening up. Before we met our Allies, we had 12 weeks of training where we shared our stories and learned about all the barriers that keep people in poverty.

We were nervous the day we met our Allies. I thought, “What can they possibly do for me? These people were born into money. How are we supposed to make this work?” Then I realized they were just as nervous as we were.

I discovered my Allies truly cared about me so I kept going back. I was matched with Quianna, who knew all about homeownership because she had just purchased her first home, and Sarah, who is a budgeting queen and knows a lot of people.

The biggest challenge for me was saving money. I was wasting money eating out and buying little, unnecessary things. I didn’t realize it until I wrote it down. They make you write it all down. It was hard to get a paycheck and put the money away. But I was 42 and had no savings. I didn’t have student loans, but I did have some credit card debt. I didn’t know it was hurting me until I saw my credit score.

When the second Circles group started, I stayed. The program got better with each session. I’m now in the fifth class, and Circles is thriving here. Much of the material I know, but I still need all that support. Our Circles has been so much fun we even have a relay team for the Pittsburgh Marathon. I never would have tried this on my own. There’s so much support. It’s a “push” support. They want to see you succeed. They want to see you reach your goals.

At the end of 2018, I purchased a home of my own. My sons’ father is very involved with all three of my kids, who are now 19, 9 and 5. My daughter is a freshman at Seton Hall University. I’m now in charge of scheduling and payroll at the rehab center, and I earn \$18.23 per hour. My credit score is 740. I still get excited when I check my credit score every two weeks. It’s a great feeling.