

## Saint John's is Making Real Changes for Homeless Women

One graduate shares her story

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**B**e ready for a smile if you end up in Michelle Nicolette's aisle at Walmart. During her year as a cashier, she claims to have never had a bad customer, as she insists on staying cheerful and has found that her "sunny" disposition is contagious.

At 44 years old, Nicolette has a lot to be smiling about. Within the past three years, she has completely transformed her life of homelessness, 20 years of drug abuse, and a lack of education to becoming sober, completing her GED, getting her first job, and living independently. Next up, she would love to learn to drive. With a quick laugh and a little grin, she calls herself a late bloomer.

Her story is hard to share, yet Nicolette is strong and wants to help others who have struggled like

herself. Since the age of three, she grew up in foster care, group homes, children's shelters and juvenile halls. A family adopted her two brothers. As she describes it, "they had each other and I had myself."

Nicolette was facing the world alone, and at a low point at 19 years old, gave in to the pressure of trying meth, something she had been very against. She recalls it feeling similar to the Ritalin she grew up on, and while she was normally shy, the drugs made it easy for her to be social. It quickly became her routine, and just as quickly stole two decades of her life, which she spent "running the streets" in San Francisco's Tenderloin district.

During her late teens, Nicolette married her first husband, a relationship that lasted four years.



Michelle at work - Photo by Steven Hellon

Starting at the age of 17 and into her early 20s, she had four children. Her daughters were adopted at birth and her son grew up in group homes. Today Nicolette is in touch with three of her children and is proud that they live productive lives and have "broken the cycle" of three generations in foster care.

Looking back at what she has lost, and what her children missed, Nicolette is so thankful for those who have helped her get to where she is today, with a new life ahead. She is excited to tell others about the place where *real changes* were made in her life. It's a place that took her in, loved her, and became the first family she has ever had: Saint John's Program for Real Change.

Her start down the road to recovery began in 2012 when her second husband, and companion of 16 years, passed away. Nicolette was devastated and lost, battling with trying to be sober. She joined an 18-month, faith-based program in Sacramento, designed to help men and women break free of their life-controlling problems.



"Teen Challenge really opened a lot of doors for me...spiritually, mentally and emotionally," says Nicolette. "It was very healing."

When it ended, Nicolette needed to find a program that would accept a single woman without children and help her gain job skills and an education. She called Saint John's.

"When they told me all that they offered, I couldn't believe my luck," says Nicolette. "The GED, the job training... all that was invaluable to me."

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#### CHANGES FOR HOMELESS WOMEN (CONTINUED)

Nicolette started at Saint John's in the end of 2014.

"The room I was in was the *Finding Nemo* room," says Nicolette. "I felt like a child being taken care of for the first time."

Nicolette became one of approximately 180 women and children being helped every day by Saint John's. She lived onsite for four months, before transferring to transitional housing. Being with 60 women and their children 24/7 was a new experience, and one that taught her patience. She made her first "real friendships."

"We really bring them in as family," says Michele Steeb, CEO, who has worked at Saint John's for 10 years. "It's a really important thing for them as well because if we don't help them build a new support network, when they hit tough times, they are going to go back to the old one...and that will bring them back into old habits and behaviors."

Nicolette quickly learned the daily schedule, which involved waking up at 6 a.m.; a strict rotation of chores, classes and meals; and to bed by 10 p.m. During the day, there was very limited access to her room; according to Nicolette, not having the freedom to do what you wanted was a struggle for many of the women.

With only a sixth grade education, she immediately started tutoring to prepare for the mandatory GED exam, which she passed five months later. After 30 days at Saint John's, she began working 3-4 times a week at Plates Café & Catering, one of the nonprofit's three employment training sites that help fund the program.

"I pretty much never wanted to leave [Plates]," says Nicolette. "It feels good to work hard like that because I never had."

After five months of working at Plates, Nicolette was placed at Walmart, a work-force partner of Saint John's. She now lives in an apartment close to work that she is responsible for, with a close friend she made while at Saint John's. She loves her job and is grateful for those who gave her hope, taught her structure, made her work hard, and who never gave up on her.

"It's probably good Saint John's is not closer because I promise you, I would be there every day when I am not working, because I love the women there," says Nicolette. "It's like coming home for a visit."

## WHAT IS SAINT JOHN'S PROGRAM FOR REAL CHANGE?

Saint John's has greatly evolved since its founding as a non-profit in 1985—today it is a year-long rehabilitative program dedicated to the eradication of homelessness for each woman and child it serves. Program residents (and their children) live onsite in a communal housing setting and then in transitional housing. They are not required to pay rent, but must commit to a long-term, challenging, all-encompassing program.

### HOW DOES IT OPERATE?

Saint John's program is intense, very structured, and provides each woman with critical and mandatory services that are all offered onsite:

- mental health therapy
- alcohol and drug counseling
- parenting education
- budgeting classes
- healthy relationship training
- hands-on employment training (at Plates, Plates Midtown and First Steps)
- job placement through Workforce Partners (such as Walmart, Sutter Health, Sacramento Kings, etc.)

### WHO DOES IT SERVE

Up to 180 women and children every day, 550 women and children every year.

## WHAT IS THE NEED

- The most rapidly growing segment of the homeless population across the nation is single, mother-led families
- Every night there are up to 300 women and children on Saint John's waiting list

### WHY DOES IT WORK?

Saint John's has reduced its reliance on public funding to less than 20% of its budget, to have the flexibility to require sobriety of its clients (this is no longer allowable with HUD funding). *It relies heavily on private funding to fuel its programs.*

### SUCCESS RATES FOR EMPLOYMENT

96% of women who graduate from Saint John's employment training program get placed into unsubsidized employment.

### WHAT'S IN STORE FOR 2017?

Saint John's is opening a new facility in March 2017, allowing it to serve an additional 90 women and children every day (for a total of 700-750 women and children every year).

### WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Become a sponsor—help support the new facility opening next year!
- Become a Workforce Partner
- Donate goods
- Donate a vehicle
- Eat at Plates and Plates Midtown
- Volunteer

**SaintJohnsProgram.org**

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