

# The Knowledge & Skills of Families

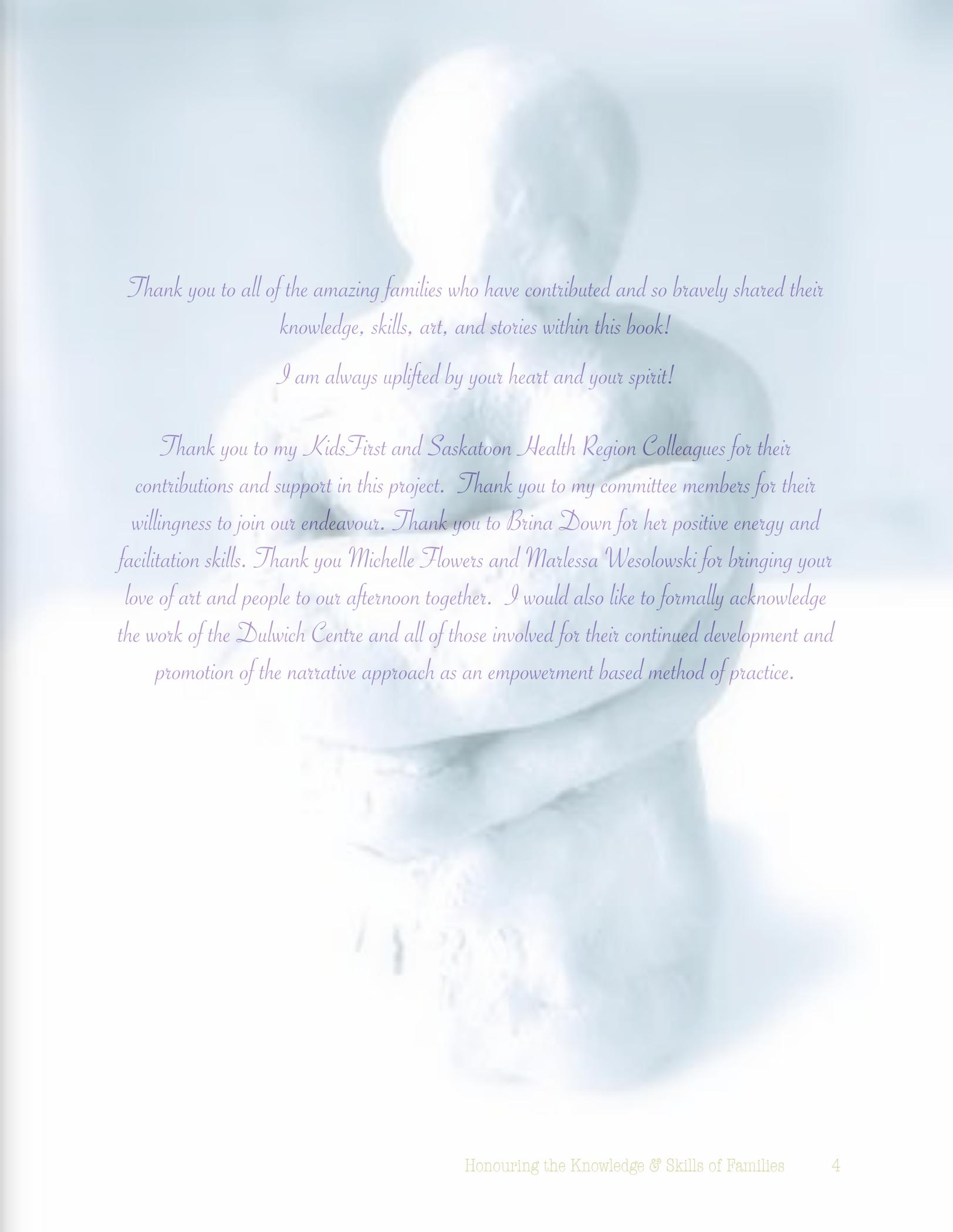
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A Narrative Project by Terri Peterson



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*Thank you to all of the amazing families who have contributed and so bravely shared their knowledge, skills, art, and stories within this book!*

*I am always uplifted by your heart and your spirit!*

*Thank you to my KidsFirst and Saskatoon Health Region Colleagues for their contributions and support in this project. Thank you to my committee members for their willingness to join our endeavour. Thank you to Brina Down for her positive energy and facilitation skills. Thank you Michelle Flowers and Marlessa Wesolowski for bringing your love of art and people to our afternoon together. I would also like to formally acknowledge the work of the Dulwich Centre and all of those involved for their continued development and promotion of the narrative approach as an empowerment based method of practice.*

# Note to Readers:

The freedom to lead a satisfying life and to enjoy good health is unequally distributed both between and within the societies in our world. This inequity is illustrated in the differences experienced by individuals in their material conditions, behavioural options, education opportunities, employment conditions, psychosocial support, and the quality of the natural environments they reside in; this in turn makes some people more vulnerable to poor holistic health. Social stratifications also create differences in both the utilization of and the access to health care services, even within the Canadian universal health care system. Racism, trauma, social exclusion & colonization have particularly impacted the health of Aboriginal people in Canada (Reading & Wein 2009). These inequities converge and are principally illustrated by the great diversity of experiences in early childhood. The World Health Organizations' Commission on the Social Determinants of Health (2008) calls to "close the gap in one generation" by focusing on "improving the conditions of daily life - the circumstances in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age" (pg 2). Families, as the heart of any community, play an integral role in encouraging and practicing healthy lifestyles (Health Canada 2010). Investing in the early years provides one of the greatest potentials to reduce health inequities within one generation (WHO 2008). KidsFirst Saskatoon is an early childhood intervention program which hopes to do just that in providing both support and services to vulnerable families with young children in Saskatchewan.

The culture, stories, skills and knowledge of many communities have been dishonoured, disqualified, and marginalized for historical, cultural, and social reasons. Being included in the society in which one lives is vital to the material, psychosocial, and political aspects of empowerment that underpin social well-being and equitable health (WHO 2008). The collective narrative approach introduces a process to collectively identify, acknowledge, honour, and richly describe the knowledge and skills of marginalized communities. The collective narrative approach is an anti-oppressive and empowerment based community research method. This approach emphasizes, values, and honours the importance of story and the traditions of storytelling in Indigenous cultures.

In the autumn of 2014, I engaged in a collaborative and transparent partnership with a community of KidsFirst Saskatoon participants (both current and past) to build knowledge based on the concepts of empowerment, capacity building, social inclusion, resiliency, service delivery, and equality. The primary purpose of our project is to honour the resiliency, hopes, knowledge, and skills of families involved in our program and to support a strong narrative of capacity for the participants to build on. Over the last three months, the co-authors have explored and documented their narratives of struggle and determination with a dream of inspiring other families, impacting service delivery, and addressing social inequities in the larger community.

The authors of 'Honouring the Knowledge & Skills of Families' hope to support the empowerment and the sense of community for families.



This Project was approved by the Saskatoon Health Region, the University Of Saskatchewan & the University Of Regina Ethics Boards

# Preface:

As you are reading “Honouring the Knowledge & Skills of Families’ I invite you to respond as an

**Outsider Witness** as outlined by Michael White

## The Narrative Definitional Ceremony

Michael White (2003)

### Identifying the Expression

As you listen to the stories of other families, which expressions caught your attention or captured your imagination? Which ones struck a cord for you? What in particular impacted you?

### Describing the Image

What images of people’s lives, identities, and the world did these expressions evoke? What did these expressions suggest to you about these people’s purpose, values, beliefs, hopes, dreams, and commitments?

How would you characterize what struck you? What did it speak to?

### Embodying Responses

What is it about your own life that accounts for why these expressions caught your attention or struck a cord? Do you have a sense of which aspects of your own experience resonated with these expressions and the images evoked by these expressions?

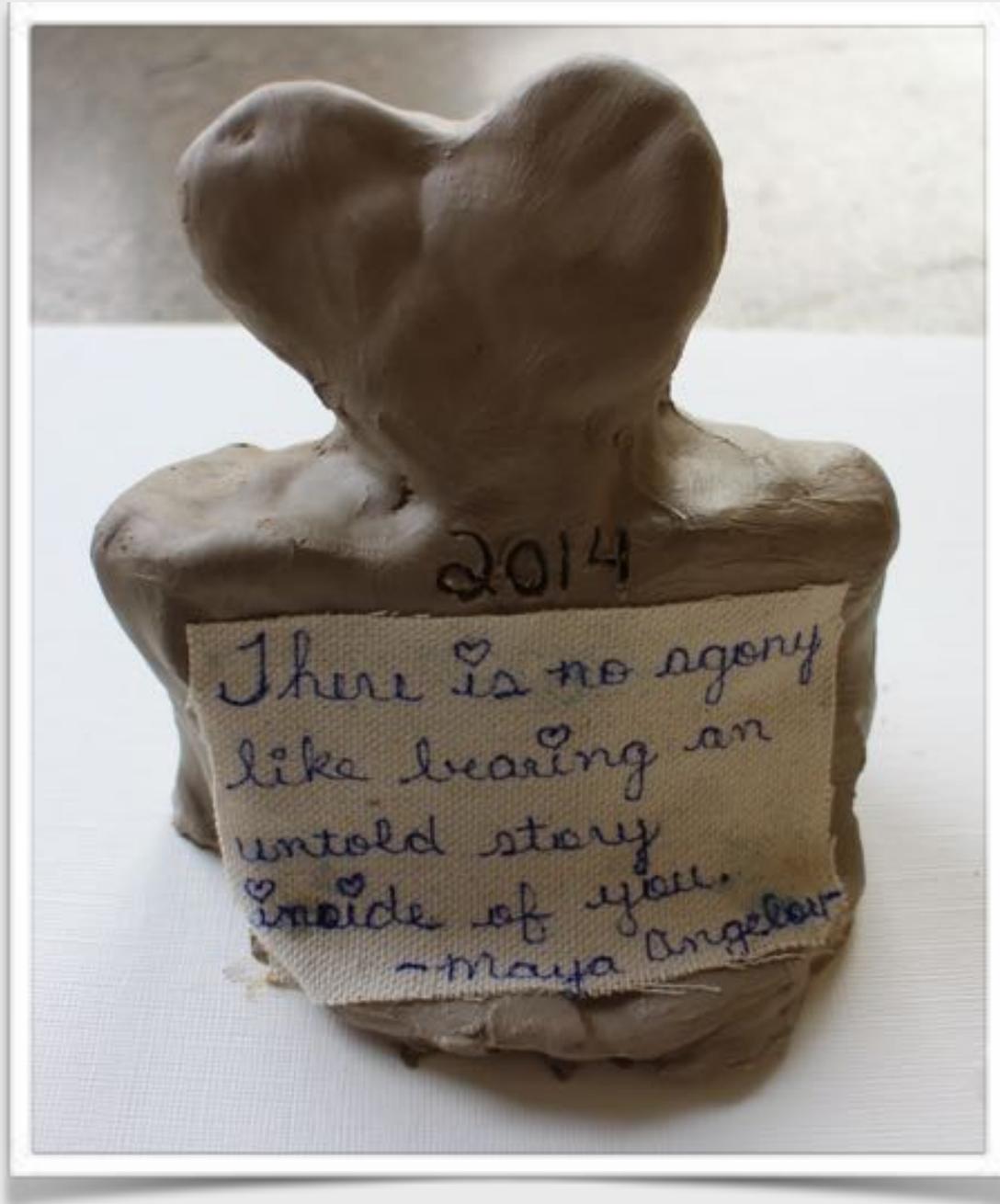
### Acknowledging Transport

How have you been moved on account of being present to witness these expressions of life? Where has this experience taken you to, that you would not otherwise arrived at, if you hadn’t been present as an audience to this presentation?

In what way have you become other than who you were on account of witnessing these expressions and stories in the way that you have? What new possibilities does it evoke in your life?

# Background:

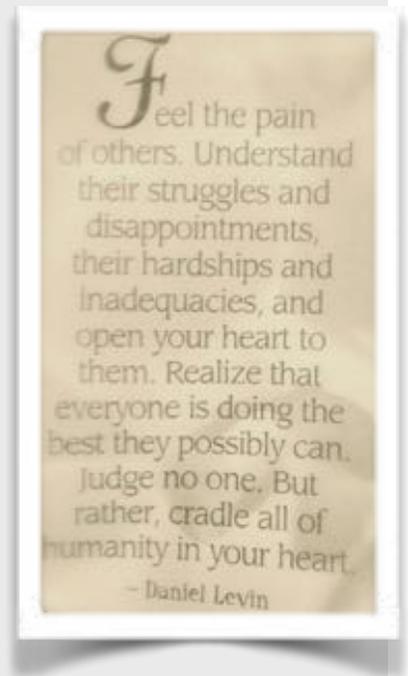
Find Acceptance & Build on That



### I believe that through the difficult times I am stronger

I have learned about my own strength throughout my life. I have been victimized and have had many abusive intimate relationships. I have been used by friends. I went through a break-up from a good marriage that I was in for almost 10 years. I am a single parent and at times it is hard. My youngest child's father isn't allowed to see him unless it is supervised. He has only seen him seven times in his whole five years.

I lost my biological brother last year. My brother suffered from mental illness and depression. We had lost our mother from cancer a couple of years ago. My brother was living on the street before he moved into my extra room. He suffered from both depression and addiction. He hadn't seen his children for three or four years. He was not well. My brother told me days before he died that if he couldn't get money for his addiction that he would kill himself. I found my brother's body; he had hung himself from my daughter's bunk bed. My mentor was with me at that time but she couldn't stay. I called my oldest son to come over and asked him to take his brother back to his place for the weekend. It was a rough time for me but I believe that I became stronger that weekend as I had no other choice. Since my brother passed, I keep getting stronger every day but it is a challenge for me. I have good days and I have bad days but I am thankful for the good days. I believe that through the difficult times I am stronger.



### They are my sunshine

I married my husband ten years ago but we lived in separate countries for the first three years of our marriage. When I first arrived in Canada, I studied English as a second language and began to create a circle of friends but I soon became pregnant with my daughter and had my first, very cute, little 'Sweet'. She was my sunshine. I was so happy to have my sweet little family - my husband, my daughter, and I. Very soon after her birth, we had many changes happen in our lives. Two families from our home country came to live with us and there were so many people in our very small house. I became pregnant with my second one, my little boy. My daughter was still quite young and I began to experience postpartum depression, although I didn't know what it was called at the time. I could just feel my emotions going down and down. I found support through my involvement in the KidsFirst program to understand what was happening to me. I didn't know what postpartum depression even meant or that it could really happen to me in my life.

I always felt so fortunate to connect with KidsFirst and all of the professionals there who had helped me get through this very hard time. I felt so sad and weak. I couldn't take care of myself, my family or my children very well.

I didn't know what my future would be, but in the end I learned to face the situation in my family. When my second child was born, it was very hard because he would cry for no reason all day long. My father also died very suddenly during this time and I was very lonely for my family overseas. I was so very tired all of the time. I went to the people at KidsFirst who gave me good ideas to calm babies. They also helped me to try to do something else to get my babies attention away from his sadness. It would help to remind myself that it wouldn't always be like this - he wouldn't continue to cry like this when he is one or two years old. I felt so, so bad in these many ways but the support around me really helped me to get through it. Now my son is getting better and I feel more relaxed too.



With support, I went and stayed in the hospital for awhile because I was really down and tired. I felt like I was 'out of control'. The doctors were able to see that my thyroid was quite low and I started taking two medications to help. I began connecting with a counsellor at KidsFirst and step by step I began to feel better. I think I am a better mom for my little boy and my little girl....not a crazy woman (laughs). The support workers from KidsFirst came to my house once or twice a week and would give me suggestions to try. If I needed someone I would call them and they would show up at my house very soon after. I really appreciated that. I felt much better because I started to understand that postpartum depression was not such a bad and scary thing. Once we knew what it was and how it worked, we could

figure out the problem which caused it. This helped me to feel so much better.

My husband and I lived separately for so long, we really didn't know each other very well when I first came to Canada. When I arrived we would do everything together but we had our children very quickly and started to find more and more problems in our marriage. We had different tempers and different ideas about how to parent our children.

My husband lost his job and we had many arguments about it. It was a very good job and he supported our family and extended family with it's good pay. It was difficult for him to find a new job and we had to face a difficult financial situation. We would argue about how we were going to pay our bills and how we were going to continue to send money home for our families. The kids were very young at that time,I was very



tired from all the work. Sometimes, I would regret my decision to come to Canada as I had lost so many of the things that I valued. I would often think of how I missed my family and my previous job. I would think about how I needed to make it work for my kids. Every time I looked at them laughing without any worry in the world, so cute and so pure, I wanted to make the changes we needed to find peace again. My children are my sunshine and they will always make me stronger. As a mom I knew I must do something. I requested to work with my KidsFirst counsellor again and we began couples counselling. I think it was one of the greatest decisions I have ever made in my life.

After couples counselling, I started to look at my situation very differently. I began to think about how we could work together to make a better future for our family. We always found very good ideas through our counselling and I still remember her leaving us with homework every week (laughs). When we began our counselling work, we were not even talking or looking at each other in the face but soon we began trying to connect with each other little bit every day. We did our best to make changes and we began to tell each other how we were feeling. I will never forget the day when we explored our goals for our family together and we found that our dreams were totally the same. Maybe we hold different ideas sometimes but we realized that we wanted the same things for our lives. My husband is not a bad man and I am not a bad woman but when we are under big pressures even the very tiniest thing can cause arguments. The important thing is that we love our family and we love our kids. We want to build a good relationship and stay together even in the hard times. We want to watch our kids grow together; laughing together and having a sweet home. It is our same goal! Anytime we would start arguing, we would look at our dreams together and it would help us. We know that if we are close, that together, we can make a better future for each other and our family. As a partner, you have to compromise sometimes! Maybe my husband doesn't always have a good temper but he is a good man. He is very responsible and honest. He loves our kids and our family. I look at myself and see the weaknesses in my own temper. People have different personalities and ways of doing things. Nobody is perfect but we can try to understand each other. I will not give up!

We want to watch our kids grow together and we want to have a sweet home. There was a time after our couples counselling work when things got hard between my husband and I once again. I wasn't sure if I should leave my marriage or if I should stay. My home visitor at KidsFirst encouraged me to be strong and reminded me that I would make the right decision for me and for my children. My husband and I had a very serious talk. He apologized for his behaviour and we decided to try to live all together one more time. We worked very hard again and used the many strategies that had worked for us before. We remembered our same goals and dreams. We also worked at lessening the pressure. Even though we didn't call our counsellor for help and she wasn't working with us at that time, she was with us. We had all of that very useful knowledge and skills. Sometimes when we would fight I would feel out of control and 'like I just didn't know' but we would think in our counsellor's mind (laughs) and we were able to get ourselves calm again. We became clear and had the chance to look forward. We began to help each other again. We did online employment research and I helped my husband to create a new cover letter and resume. My husband got a new job soon after we came back together and the whole situation got much better. I felt like I came back again to myself again and I began to feel good about myself.



## All hooves

I was able to get the kids back the first time I was involved with social services, but then something happened that set us back and the kids were apprehended for again. I didn't know if I could make it through that second time. I didn't feel like I had a say in any of it and that was the hardest thing for

me! I didn't have my kids with me and I was under someone's scrutiny all the time. The situation was depressing! I was alone without a partner but I knew I had to fight. It was very painful but I went 'all hooves' and did everything they had wanted me to do! I had to show them. I had to do a lot of things to prove myself.



Sometimes a mother goes through a lot and sometimes she doesn't have family or the dads of the family to back her up. I decided that I would not allow anyone to think that I was an incompetent mother. I knew I was trying my hardest to raise my kids, and yeah, it was difficult at times but if you don't have a lot of support and six kids, it is difficult.

I want to share that my kids are beautiful and wonderful children. If you met them, I am sure you would agree, not because they are mine but because they are so wonderful. I had wanted to have one more child, even though I have six already, but I had to lay that idea

down which was also very hard for me. My partner didn't want any more children. It was so hard to give up on the idea of having one more child because my youngest children spent six months of their infancy in care and I missed it all. It was so painful to be away from my babies. I felt like the first part of their lives were taken away from me and it tore me up inside. I wanted to have one more but I just couldn't; I am trying to do better for my family!



When I was eighteen years old, I could barely stand on my own. I lived on the farm my whole life and I was so shy. I could barely speak for myself and it was a very scary thing just coming to the city. I have had trouble finding people who are positive in my life and I have felt isolated at times. I don't want that for my kids, I want them to know how to pick good friends. I want my kids to be able to speak for themselves. I want them to be able to stand up on their own in society.



## I was given this life because I am strong enough to live it

Everyone was given a life to live and life is so precious! People can take life for granted and don't always realize how very precious it is; sure some days are bad but that's just how things go!

When I was a young girl, I was returned to my mother's home from the only home that I knew. I had been raised by foster parents for the first five years of my life and it was a very good thing in my life. It was heartbreaking for me to be removed from them. I felt so lost and so out of place in my new northern home. I was confused for a long time because I didn't know where I belonged. I knew my mom was suppose to be my mom but it didn't feel like it. She hadn't been there for me for so many years. I would call my foster mom on the phone and cry with her. It was really tough on me. I had felt safe and cared for at my foster parents' farm. They had taught me to love and how to be loved.

I can recall my first days of kindergarten so clearly. It was really hard for me. I didn't like school. I didn't fit into the group there because I had been raised so differently. I was a quiet girl and kept to myself. I kept my distance and watched everybody else (laughs). I have always been quiet ever since I can recall. I remember sitting and watching my mom too, getting drunk so many times. She would turn into this really nasty person and I hated that person! I knew from a very young age that I did not ever want to become like my mother. No one ever told me that drinking was bad or anything but I knew how it made me feel. I watched my mom and that was enough. She would invite all of these drunk people over and they would party in the house - it was so scary. My biological dad was also an alcoholic. He was never around while I was growing up and he was never the father that I had wanted him to be. He died a young man. Living with my mom was hard. I couldn't wait to leave the house and move away from it all. I would think to myself that as soon as I turn eighteen I would be gone. I wanted to live a healthy and normal life without the alcoholism. My family was so spread apart and no one is close because of the alcohol. I knew before I had my son that I didn't want this life for myself or my family, but after I had him, I knew I could no longer allow this to happen to us and I would have to leave.



When I first became pregnant my mom did not like it all so I had to live with one of my brothers for a time but I moved back home right before my due date. It was a tough time because I was so young and my mom wasn't at all supportive. The second night that I had my son home with me, I was having a difficult time breastfeeding him. He wasn't latching on and he was crying. When I asked my mom to help me and she tried to be helpful initially but ended up yelling at me, threatening that she would have to go out and drink with all the stress. I think that this was the exact moment when my mothering instincts



really kicked in...because I knew I had to leave right then and there. I told my son that everything was going to be ok for us and I was gonna make sure of it! I remember him latching on right after my promise to him.

I was talking to my son's other grandmother on the phone a lot at that time. She knew that my mom was in a really bad place and not able to be supportive, so we made a plan to leave the house together. It was she that suggested Saskatoon and was really helpful with the move and applying for social services. She told me that she had been through the same things when she was homeless and pregnant. She gave me the information and I took the steps I needed to take to move. I was desperate to leave my mom's house and my son's grandmother was like the supportive mother that I didn't have in my life. I first met her when I was six months pregnant and I knew she was a good

person right away. I use my mind and body to get a good read of people and I am usually spot on. I can tell now when someone has problems or drinks too much and I know I don't need or want that in my life anymore. My whole family - my mom, my aunts, my uncles, my grandparents - they all drink and I don't want that in our lives. I want to change that from now on. Family is important to me, and together, my son and I have found our way.

*There are many people who have torn us down but we have risen above!*

There has been a lot of hurt in my life. I want to do a good job with my kids, but sometimes doing that good job can be hard. It is hard because you have to much to do and there aren't enough hours in a day. Sometimes I feel like I just can't get it together. You can really lose yourself in parenting. mother can feel like she's failed, wondering if you are working too much and not with the kids enough but ending to earn a living. I am trying to find some peace in my soul.



I have been trying to have a healthy intimate relationship in my life but it has been very difficult. My partner struggles with his issues too and we all work so hard in our family! My partner has been there with me for the last two years to support me and all of the kids. He has been at home every day, helping with dishes, laundry or whatever. When you work full time, you have to have some help! I appreciate that and I should let him know that! We fight quite a bit, but maybe our fighting wouldn't be that bad if we just honoured each other more.

My life was pretty depressing...well I was depressed for a long time, maybe the first twenty some years of it. I know I have come a long way since I was young but I still want to press in some more and keep building the life I want for myself. I have so much of what I have always desired for myself. I am thankful that I have gotten where I am. I have fulfilled many of the things that I wanted! I still want a supportive and loving partner and that is still missing at times but the main thing for me is to see my kids grow

up happy and strong! I want my kids to be able to talk to me about things if they are struggling. I want them to be able to stand on their own.

### Just let the emotion come and find the calm

I tell my kids to let it go. To just let the emotion come and find the calm. Sometimes it is like I am telling them one thing and still caught in doing the opposite of what I am telling them to do. I was getting over my past, but now I am going through a separation and all the stress seems to bring it up again. I don't want a repeat of past mistakes for my kids! I don't want to repeat the cycle. I never, ever repeat the physical abuse but sometimes when things get rough I get rough with my words. I don't hurt my kids but I want my kids to know that yelling and name calling is something that we won't be carrying on in our family. It is going to stop here! I don't want them thinking that it is normal. Making these changes can be so hard but I know I can do it because I am doing it!

I believe some people have risen after life. I believe that there is a heaven and a hell. There is also a purgatory which is where I lived when I was a growing up. I was stuck in the middle of the two, always waiting to be judged.

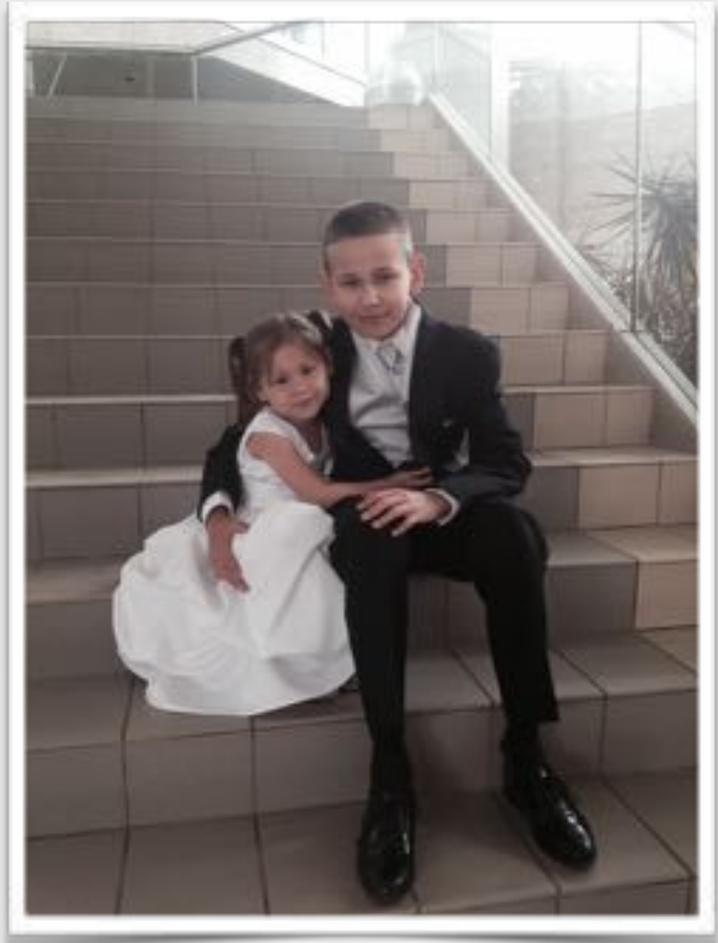


Isolation is like a padded room and all you want to do is scream. I was hurt very badly when I was a kid and that still hurts me today especially because it is that much harder to raise my kids the right way. Even as a kid I knew I didn't want to be like the family that hurt me. To help me break the cycle I just keep saying to myself "stay strong, stay strong, you can do it"! Sometimes I wonder - how much stronger do I have to be before I just unravel? I couldn't handle the pressure all alone! There's been a few times where I have almost lost my mind, especially going through stressful times. Those are the times that I just want to pack my bags and go...but I never do! It is in those tough times that it is so much harder to not go ahead and pick up on those old bad habits but I am fighting for it. It's exhausting but thank God I am doing it! I have a nice guy in my life now who is supporting me and helping me. It's important to have someone helping you through things. I know no one can hurt my kids like I was hurt and no one is going to hurt me anymore.

### *It is never okay*

I have worked hard over the years to become a better mom to my four kids. I struggled for a long time with my intimate relationships and domestic violence. My partner abused alcohol and drugs and me. Substance use has been an issue in all of my intimate relationships. My partner's addictions get him in trouble with the law and he is often in jail.

The love both me and my children have for my partner makes us both want to push harder to keep our family together. I value my family and friends above all else. I am the type of person who is always there for you no matter what, this goes especially for my children. I will always be there for others but now I will also notice when others are there for me. When I am feeling down my partner is always there for me, even though it has to be often over the phone. My partner has put me through a lot but he has also helped me through a lot. He tells me every day that he is proud of me and he wants to keep changing so we can be proud of him!



It makes me sad to think about all the stuff I've been through, but I feel like we are on the other side of it now. The last couple of years have been tough with my eldest son - from suicidal notes to having serious girlfriends to a criminal life. Seeing my son depressed and acting out was hard but we figured it out together. He has become such a wonderful

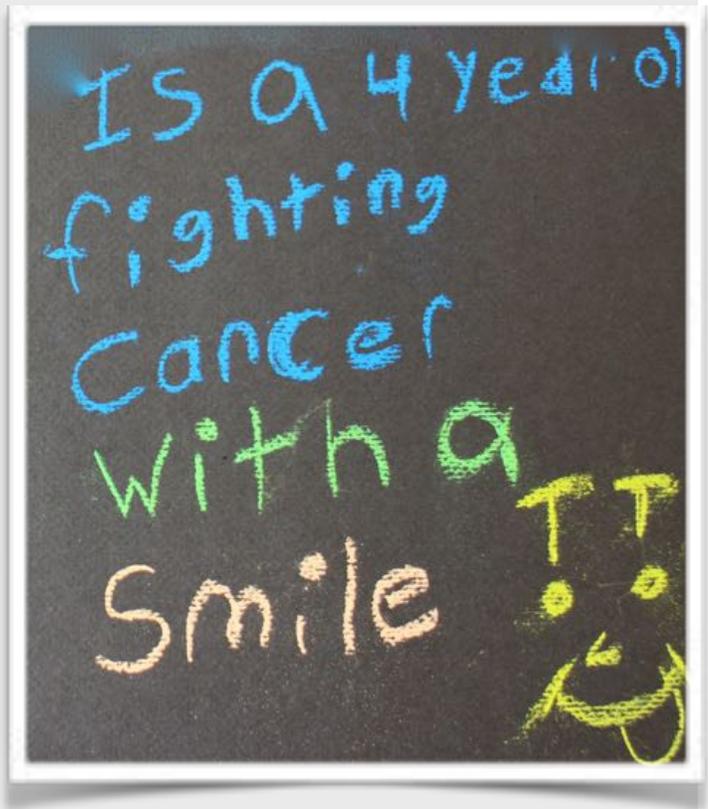


person. We are so proud of him! Last year he received the grade eight award. All of his teachers just love him! He has come such a long way from what he was doing and where he was a couple of years ago. He is doing really well in his first year of high school too which also makes me so proud. He wakes up every day and goes to school and this summer he will go to work for his biological dad. Sometimes my son gets mad when I am always pushing him to go forward, but I tell him that I only push because I love him and I want him to get somewhere in life. I don't want him growing up, doing drugs, and living a criminal life.

I don't want my kids to go through what I went through as a kid! I want my kids to grow up slowly, not so fast like I did! My mom would go out and party all the time when I was little. She would leave my brother and I with whoever - many of them were really mean to us. We would tell our mom but she would not believe us because she was always drunk. That's not how I am and that's not how I am going to raise my kids. I will constantly push my kids to do well. They know that abuse is not okay and I am so sorry that they have seen so much of it in their young lives. I tell my son that it is never okay for you to hit a woman. The fact that it happened to mom in the past, does not ever mean it's ok for anyone! I also tell the girls that it is not ok for a man to touch them or to hit them ever! I know that they know and understand that; I see them growing up and learning more and more everyday. My youngest daughter is so smart; just like a little adult. Last night she was sad before she went to bed and when I asked her what was wrong she said, "I miss my daddy". I told her that Daddy has to deal with what he has done and until he does that, he can not come home. She said to me, "Oh mom, if we move away from here, daddy could be a better person". She said this in her little four year old voice. She is so smart! We know what we have to do!

She has definitely showed me what true strength is!

I grew up in a really screwed up household. The only person that really understood me as a kid was my auntie; she helped me until I got old enough to actually stand on my own two feet. My parents were unavailable; my mom is a functioning alcoholic and my dad is a partial ruin. I was the one they took their frustration out on and received all of the abuse. At the age of twelve, I would be the first one home from school because all of the chores in the house were up to me. If I didn't do the chores I knew what was coming. I had no choice but to get them done as quickly as possible. As soon as I was finished I would be out that door. When I wasn't working or grounded, I was never at home. You were not gonna catch me in that house if I didn't have to be there. There was no way in hell I was gonna stay in that home if I didn't have to be.



When I needed my parents the most they were never there for me but the minute they needed me I was always there for them. I have realized that, "if you can't show me what I am showing you, I just don't need you in my life". Frankly, I am done with all that! It is time to actually have people in my life that can reciprocate. No more one way street for me!

I was hit with every parent's nightmare last year - my toddler was diagnosed with leukaemia. I am still haunted by it all today and I will be for the rest of my life. It was the worst time I have ever had to go through. I had no other choice but to push through and deal with it, but it has been very challenging for my little family. I am a lone parent with three very young children so I had to ask for help. I had my two eldest children stay with relatives to help care for them while we went through the active treatment. I wish now that I wouldn't have sent them to another house at all but I didn't have much of a choice at the time because of their ages and how often I had to stay in the hospital too.

It was my strength that got me through the last year. Many of my friends bailed on us the minute she got diagnosed and we lost both family and friends. I worked very hard to find and keep the people who were caring towards me and my family at the time.

I decided that we did not have time for people who were not good for us - no matter who they were! If they were not a support for us, I just had to stop talking to them. The cancer is always going to be part of our lives, for the rest of our lives. It is every parent's worst nightmare. Although, I have done a lot of this on my own, I have some good friends that stuck by us and I always had KidsFirst.

Everybody in my house feels it! I am trying to push through it all the best that I can! It is like I am being driven by a wheel. I got to do what I got to do! It is basically a mother thing! It is like an instinct to me! You just do it and notice how strong you really are! My kids need me more than they ever did. My daughter has taught me a lot over the last eleven months. She hasn't given up! She still has her spirit! She still has a smile on her face! I couldn't ask for a better reaction from her in such a crappy situation. She has definitely showed me what true strength is! She is like me in so many ways! I've been able to open my eyes since my daughter was diagnosed, and the kids and I have become so much stronger together because of it all.



Mother

## Mother's instinct

When I first became pregnant with my son I was very young and I was scared but I knew that it was going to be different. When I was pregnant, I worried that I was going to mess something up with him but after I gave birth to him that feeling went away. My motherly instinct came through right at the right moment! I just knew what to do with him when he was born. It was different with my second child because of his special needs. I was not prepared for the constant screaming and crying, not being able to put him down, and his breathing problems at night. When he was awake he looked like a normal, healthy, happy young child but at night we had to monitor him because he was not getting enough oxygen. It was a huge stress on me. I don't think I slept at all for his first six months.

I knew that something was wrong with my boy, but I didn't know what. When I was a little girl my grandmother saved my life. I was ill and she knew it was serious. She grabbed me out of my mother's house and rushed me to the northern medical centre. She screamed so loudly that the nurses couldn't miss seeing the signs of illness. They flew me to the city and removed my appendix which was just about to rupture. I would have only lived one more day in my condition. I was going from doctor to doctor trying to find out what was wrong with my son for what seemed like forever but I did not give up just like my grandmother. Finally after two years, we found out he has a hole in his heart. He will always need to sleep with oxygen. The lack of oxygen he experienced in infancy has created some developmental delay but I am on top of that now. Things are getting better for him and things are getting better for me.

## Resiliency

When something bad used to happen I would automatically get depressed. I would want to shut down and die. Now that part of it is usually pretty short-lived because I can get angry. If something difficult comes up I get more proactive. I will find resources in people to help me to fix whatever is the issue.

One of the most recent difficulties for me was when my kids were taken into the care of child protective services. When it happened I just wanted to die! I could feel myself wanting to give up and be like, screw it, there's no point! I knew who it was who called them and I knew what it was they were trying to do. My daughter had a bruise on her leg from playing with the neighbour kids and they made a call. It wasn't the first time someone called social services with a complaint and it may not be the last. I had a difficult relationship and the custody arrangement with my eldest child's father and his family. They had threatened to contact social services from the beginning - before she was even born. Things quickly spun out of control and both me and my daughter got confused and before I knew what had happened social services and the cops apprehended the kids right then and there. I was devastated! I was still nursing my youngest. The next week, I signed the papers not knowing what else to do, and started to work with social services.

When I was younger my life was decided by others - social workers, counsellors, foster parents. Before I had my daughter, I didn't have anywhere to go. I was six months pregnant and I wanted a life, but I didn't know where to start. Everyone else seemed so sure of what the right thing was for me and my baby. I was so young and so unsure. The pregnancy was a result of a date rape. It was hard because everyone was pushing me toward him at the time.

A couple of days after the kids were apprehended, I spoke to my neighbour about the situation, and she disclosed that the bruise had happened when my daughter had been playing at their house. I gave her written statement to the child protection worker and the police. There were never any charges laid. This particular time in my life had been very stressful. I had just purchased a new home and I had started a new daycare in my home which I had to shut down directly because of the circumstance. There was also a flood in the basement a month later destroying much of it. My finances had been further altered because my children were no longer in my home and I was no longer eligible for child tax credit. Money became extremely stressful and I could no longer afford my house with my business gone, so instead of losing my house, I needed to rent it out and find a cheap place to rent.

I knew because of the situation I had to prove myself as a parent. I went to some classes and services as directed by social services. I also started doing this or that program on my own. I remembered what my foster parents did when they were taking care of business and I copied that. I found helpful programs through children's mental health services. I was seeing the counsellors, I was taking the parenting classes, I was working with the parent aide. I had a very good relationship with my parent aide and her support helped me a lot. She had real life experience and she could see the difficulties that I was managing with my daughter. It was relieving to have someone see that and to know it wasn't only about me. We had a difficult beginning, my daughter and I, but I love her and I want the best for her. Getting my kids back was one of the hardest things for me to do and it took longer than I would have liked it to take! I had to see my kids for short visits at first then we worked towards overnight visits and weekends. I applied for social assistance so I could rent a place. I got everything in order so my kids could come home to me and finally they did! It was really hard though! There is a stigma connected to young parents. It didn't feel fair and a big part of me wanted to give up much of the time but I did not give up! A good word for me is resiliency!



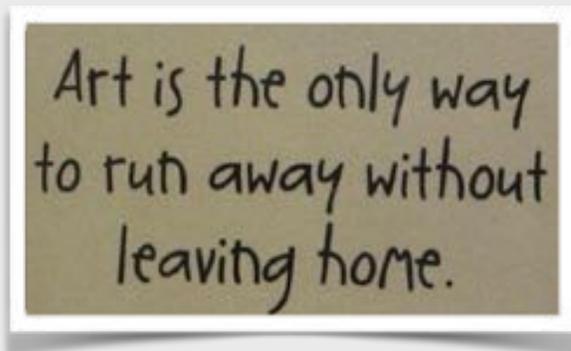
### Bloom and flourish

A painting that I hope portrays the power and sacredness of women, as well as their vulnerabilities. As a woman grows, so does the depth of her heart and soul.

Her wisdom reaches vast distances as her roots become further planted in her obligations and responsibilities which also serve to empower her as she continues to bloom and flourish amongst her surroundings, proving the resiliency of the women and her family!

### I would draw to create a space of my own

When I was young, I would to block myself out from the world and all of the hard things around me so I didn't get hurt. There was really no one who I could count on but art made it easier to cope. Art helped me to create my own little world. I started cooking for the some of the same reasons but the



main purpose was always to feed my brothers and sisters. The fact was that my family was always hungry. There wasn't many groceries in the house ever so I didn't have much to go on, but I would grab whatever there was in the cupboards and put it all together. It made everyone so happy that it made me happy! I was very, very young when I first realized that I like to cook for other people and I am very good at doing it. I still enjoy the world that I enter whenever I cook today. I was lost in my family home, and I felt like there wasn't anything right for me there. My home was full of alcoholism, poverty, and abuse. Cooking was a safe way for me to feel happy when I was young. Taking care of the kids on my own is sometimes stressful but I just put on their cartoons and I have my time. Art and cooking help me and really mellow me out.



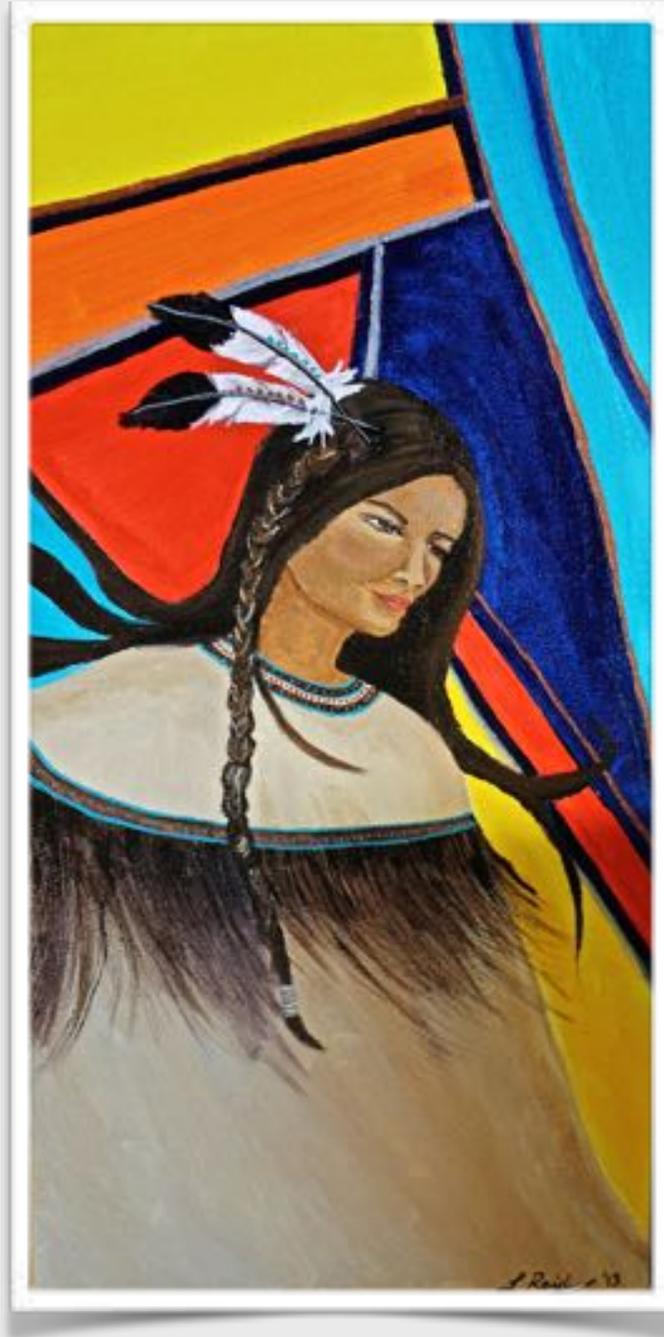
## I was born in the Far North

I was born in the far North. My family was part of the sixties scoop, although I was born in the 1970's. All of my siblings - I have three brothers and a sister - were very much loved in our family of origin. Our family was Métis (French, Irish and Cree) and close knit. Until we were apprehended, we grew up in a traditional way as it was my grandparents who had raised us. We were trappers, so my parents worked away much of the time and lived on trap lines. I spoke four different languages at home, French, English, Michif, and Cree. I was reading and writing by the time I was four years old because my six year old brother had taught me. My brother was very smart and my little sister was talking in full sentences by the time she was only two years old.

I remember my home, but I don't remember leaving it. I do remember being in the receiving home though, and it reminding me of a hospital. On one side of the dorm lived the boys and the other side was for the girls. In the middle of the building was a huge hall where we ate all of our meals with the kitchen in the back. There was an open field where we could play outside, but there was strict rules about the boys staying on one side of the grass and the girls on the other. I wasn't allowed to talk to my brother. I don't remember hearing any babies crying ever or even seeing my little brother at the time so I don't think any babies lived with us in the home. They must have had a separate home for the babies or maybe they were adopted straight away. I am in the middle of writing a book about my experience and while I write, many memories are coming back to me. I remember children leaving and not coming back. I could hear children crying out at night asking "where is my brother?" or "where is my sister?". I remember feeling really scared that my little sister would be taken from me.

The longer we stayed in the home, the less my sister spoke. At first she would only speak to me until one day she stopped talking completely. Everybody thought she was a deaf mute so I began doing all the talking for her. All she would have to do is give me a look and I knew what she was thinking and exactly what she wanted. My adopted dad tells the story of visiting us at the home and seeing how close the two of us were. He couldn't bear to separate us so we were taken to their home together but I didn't see my brothers again until I was a grown woman. I grew up as the oldest in my adopted family instead of being in the middle, where I should have been, and I took on all of the responsibilities of the oldest child. We were adopted into a home that was not a healthy environment for children. My adopted mother played the the part of the happy homemaker but was mentally ill, schizophrenic, and she went undiagnosed for a long time. She tried many different medications while I was growing up but none of them seemed to be what she needed. I remember her taking pills and staying up for hours or sleeping sometimes for two or three days at a time. when this would happen, I would have to take care of my little sisters, both my biological sister and my adopted sister who had special needs. It was my responsibility to make sure we got to school in the morning. I would pack the lunches.

I would make sure that we were fed and went to bed on time. I never felt loved or part of a family while we lived there. I remember my adopted mother being a very scary person. I was so small and she was so big. I could never tell if she was going to be happy or sad or angry or depressed. When I got older I became better at predicting what kind of mood she was going to be in. I could feel her mood in the air when I walked into a room.



Pieces of Me

Sometimes my adopted mother would haunt the house at night and I barely slept a wink. More than once she would appear in a trance like state in my bedroom in the middle of the night. I can remember a time when she came into my room holding a pillow on her lap whispering to herself, “no, I can’t do that because they will find her body”. I was often afraid for my life and I was afraid for my sister’s life. I would wake up at times hearing my sister screaming and my mother beating her with her leather belt. There were times when she would hit me so hard I would wake up afterwards unsure where I was.

It felt like it was me and my sister against the world. My adopted mother acted very different in front of my dad or in public - her voice and facial expressions would alter and change. She would become this sweet, sweet, overly sweet person in front of him. I remember feeling shocked when I first really realized the stark differences between the person she was pretending to be and the monster I knew behind closed doors. When I was about twelve years old, I told my dad about what my adopted mother was doing to us when he was away from home. She denied it all and ultimately there was nothing done about any of it. To this day, I don’t know if he really believed her or if he just needed to believe her. I think he wanted her to be well, even though he must of known on some level that she wasn’t. He wanted to be able to leave and have some peace of mind. In order for him to do that, he could not believe anything else.

I became afraid all of the time, even of my dad who had never done anything to hurt us, but because my adopted mother was always ranting about men and about sex. She would tell us many things that we really didn’t understand at our ages but she crowed that she would teach us early to be modest so we wouldn't turn out the way she thought "most native women turned out". She was very racist. We were not allowed to have First Nations friends. My hair was cut short and in a typical residential school style most of my life. I remember people congratulating her, "you have such a big heart for taking them into your home and raising those poor native kids". She would sew our clothes and dress all three of us like dolls in the same dresses - people would gush.

My sister started to act out and none of the elementary schools or junior high schools in the small northern city we grew up in would take her. She kept running away, but she would be brought right back. When she was in grade seven, she had to be home schooled by our adopted mother. I worried about her all the time when I was at school. She would teach completely inappropriate topics. I would come home and find cuts on her hands from my adopted mother hitting her with open scissors. She would insist that my sister still wear her school uniform every day. My adopted mother would wake her up at 5:30am every morning to iron that uniform but also had her doing house chores late into the night to ‘pay’ for her education. Her chores often seemed unnecessary to me. I remember her pulling us from our beds in the middle of the night and dragging us by our hair. We would still be half asleep and she would make us wash every single dish in the kitchen whether it needed cleaning or not.



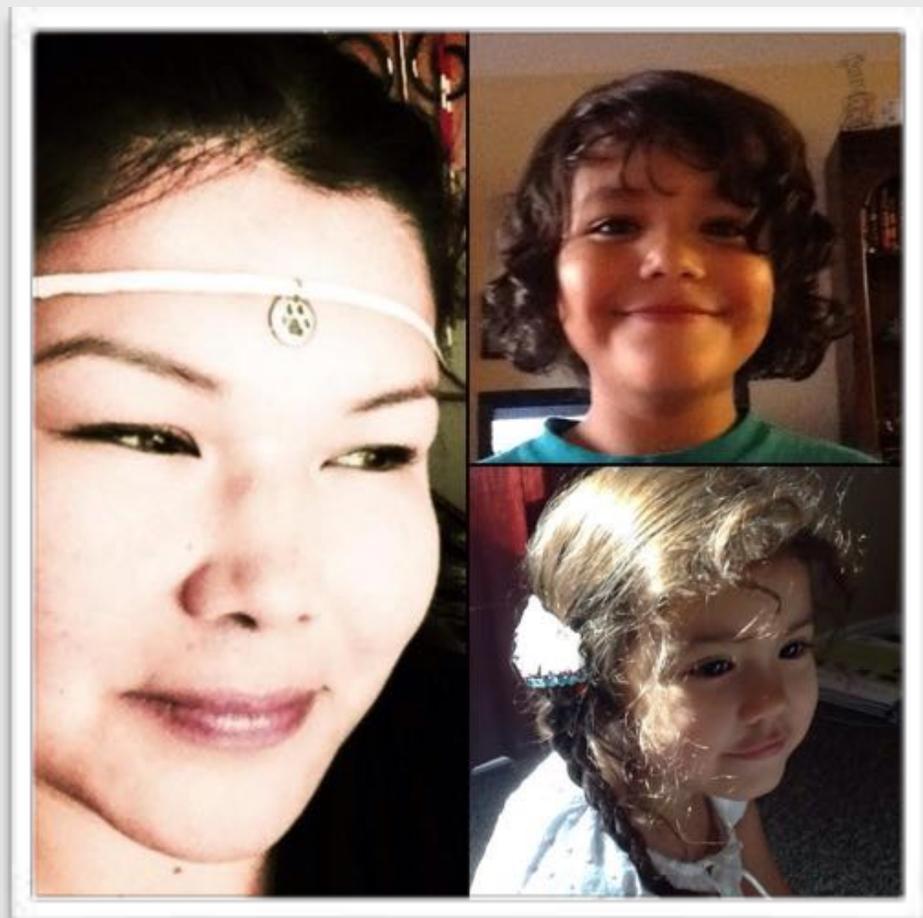
When my sister was around fourteen years old when she ran away and stayed away for a whole year. I was so afraid that something very bad had happened to her. I remember walking around our small city looking for her showing her picture to the people on the street downtown. When she came back to the house she was pregnant. My parents helped her in the beginning, but she was so young and eventually she lost custody of her baby to child protective services. It felt like we were caught in a cycle. A year later, I turned eighteen and I started drinking too. I was raped that summer. It was my first experience with anything sexual, and for a long time it was my last. I stayed far away from boys and men after that. I was so scared all of the time and had many of the feelings women have after being sexually assaulted. I started drinking heavily to escape the pain. My sister was drinking a lot too at the time and she started getting into some real trouble. We both became involved with the wrong people. I made several suicide attempts over the next ten years and lost myself to alcohol and drugs. There was a lot of not caring - about myself, the people around me, and about my life. Many of my friends were dying around me from accidents, drinking, suicide, and overdoses. There was always lots of violence and fighting. I had surrounded myself with people who didn't care whether they lived or died. We were all very lost.

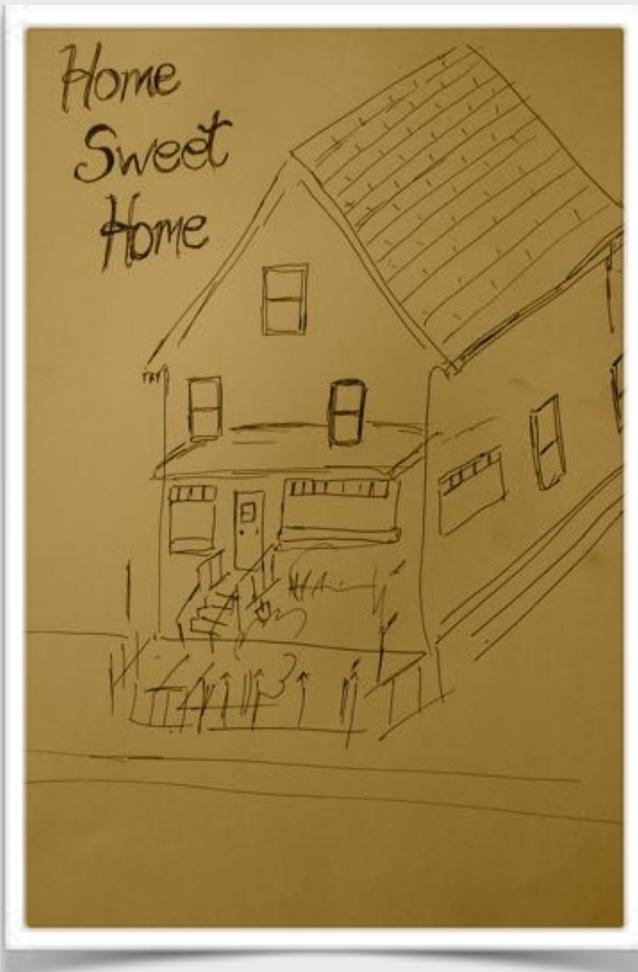
When I turned twenty-six, I tried to jump off of a bridge. I was drunk and confused. A cab driver intervened and called the police. I ended up in a holding cell over night and had a very spiritual experience. My father also describes having his own spiritual experience at that exact moment in time and we found each other again. Ever since that time in my life, the thought of suicide left me. For years, it was constantly on my mind to end my life, but I think God really helped me with that. I remember asking God if he was real, and asking him why I was here. It was really at that time that I began to wonder if there was a purpose for me, because I really should've been dead by now with the risks that I was taking. I began praying and I really meant it! I remember closing my eyes in prayer and the next morning opening them to a whole new world. The sky was a bright blue and everything seemed clean and brand new. It was as if I was looking at life through different eyes. I knew at that instant that there was a creator, and I was sure I had a purpose in this world. I was here for a reason, and I wanted to find out what it was!

I was able to stay mostly sober after and although I have still struggled in the hard times. I soon met a guy and I married him. He was abusive in a variety of ways - verbally, emotionally, mentally, spiritually, sexually, and physically. I went through so much with him wondering if the way he treated me was normal. I remember hoping that I could help him or hoping that, maybe, we could help each other. I realize now that he was not well and I was trying to be! Although, we are no longer a couple, I am glad we met as I have my two beautiful kids from that relationship whom I love and I cherish.

After the storm that I went through, my life is slowly turning around. Connecting to KidsFirst and going through counselling really helped. My self-esteem was very low when I first met my ex-husband, but it was even worse afterwards. I knew I was vulnerable from my childhood experiences when I met my husband. I think in some way he saw that and he exploited it. He might not have done this consciously but he did it nonetheless. Through the counselling and the groups I have participated in, I now realize what I am worth. It's ironic really, because my ex-husband was always trying to convince me that I was crazy when I was with him. I even questioned my own sanity at that time which was what first brought

me to KidsFirst counselling. In the end it was also where I got clear about my past, about what I wanted, and where I began to get well. I realize now that abuse is not normal nor is it healthy to be treated in that way. I have left my marriage and I am taking the steps to getting a divorce. It is empowering to have all this knowledge. I have lost too much power and control in my life, and regaining it back is giving me the courage to keep going forward.





### I have made a good home

I have supports now, but my family is not a big support in my life. They seem to try to the best of their ability, but we are not a close family. Maybe they feel that they have to distance themselves from me because I have such a full and busy life. I don't hate my mom, I love her, but she has never been supportive of me having my six children. Many, many times, and at the hardest times, she told me that I should give them up. I am so glad that I didn't give any of them up even though it is sometimes hard to have such a large family on my own. I have made a good life for them. I have a good home for them!

### Running and fighting

I haven't used drugs at all since I was eighteen years old, but it wasn't always easy, I have had to work at it! I was in an abusive relationship with my children's father for years. The only

thing that got me through it was running away from him and having the right knowledge of the right supports for us. For me it boiled down to 'running, and fighting', two things my time in the foster care system had prepared me to do. My partner and I did that back and forth thing for five years that people do in abusive relationships - he would hurt me and get charged and then we would get back together. I always knew I had to leave him, but it was hard especially when I had my second child with him. When I finally did leave him for good, it was because my mom had become ill and I needed to return home. It was my chance! The whole situation made me think and really, really gave me the extra push I needed to get out of there. When me and my baby came back home we had nothing. We stayed in a hotel for a while then at a local shelter. It was hard but my mom's death really pushed me to go as far as I have gone today.

### Determination

When I was attacked and injured, my determination to get better really saw me through it all. I was really hurt and couldn't use my arm nor move around for some time. The attack made me rely on my partner for help and we started to connect more. Thinking about it now, the experience of receiving support actually helped me to grow as a person.

My partner also describes growing while she cared for me and learning that she could truly love another person more than she loved herself. I feel the same about her. I used a lot of humour too. Humour has been a survival skill for me since I was small. I would always try to make something funny out of a bad situation (laughs).

Determination has helped us to make many changes in our lives. I didn't want my kids to go through the same stuff that I went through as a kid. I wanted to break the cycle and make changes for the better! I don't think of only myself anymore because I think of my family. I will always try my best for them. If my family needs something and we don't have it, I will go out and get it. My family has always come first for me and I learned that from my mom. When I was a little boy,



when it was just me and her, it was really pretty rough because we barely had food to eat. I often ate even though she didn't. To this day, I feed my boys and my partner first and I make sure we have enough to eat. I am the oldest in my family and it was always my job to take care of my mother and my sisters growing up. I was the protector and the helper. I am still the protector to this day.

### Opening up to spirituality was monumental for me

I grew up in a church but I didn't always know what faith was. When I was seventeen I fell into the wrong crowd and started using drugs and alcohol. The year I graduated from high school, a good friend of mine died and I was sexual assaulted. My dad started to work out of town and my mom's depression really took over to the point that she couldn't work anymore - she was really missing my dad. We were fighting all of the time. I moved in with my boyfriend because I had enough - I thought I knew everything at the time. It was not a good year, and by the time I was eighteen, I was really lost. I became very detached from everyone around me. I was out of my mind! Luckily my parents were watching out for me and they had me admitted me to the psychiatric ward at the hospital. I hated it at the time, but now I am glad I was there because I really needed the help. If I hadn't gone to the hospital, I would have been on the streets-confused and alone.

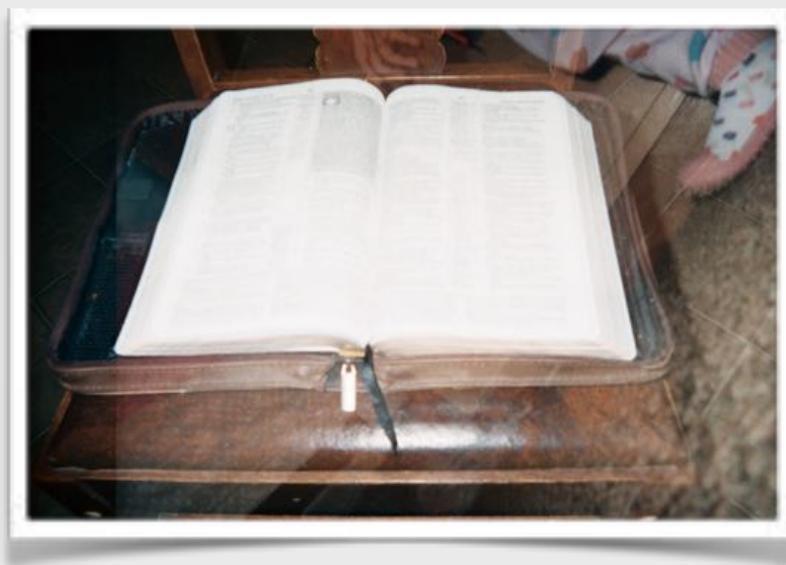
It was in the hospital that I really developed the courage to reach out and ask for help. I was out of control but I was doing things to myself that made me more out of control. I also stayed in a drug and alcohol centre that year for the first time. I fell back into that world of drugs and alcohol pretty quickly as many people do when they are first sober. At nineteen, I fell into an even a worse crowd and I wound up using heavy substances. I had another experience of sexual assault. I can look back and find moments from that year, but most of it is a blur-sometimes I don't know how I survived.

I was soon introduced to Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and I really took to the program. I was so empty and isolated at the time, I really took in everybody and everything. I was so lonely. I hated reaching out for help because it had made me feel like there was something wrong with me, but I kept sitting in the rooms and sharing anyway and it started to help. Every aspect of my life had become unmanageable - my relationships, my impulses, my thinking, my emotions, and my friendships. Everything had become so chaotic! I had to admit that I was powerless over my addiction and that my life would be more manageable without it. I had to let go of my past to move forward. I had the chance to work through the steps with a sponsor. and I took it. I began to participate in what they call 'service' in NA which is volunteer work with others and I began building the foundation for the life that I wanted. It was the first point in my life that I took any recognition that I had flaws. I was so stuck but I really didn't know any better! It was a very scary feeling to admit that I had any problems but acceptance is one of the principles of faith. Once you accept something about yourself, you begin to grow! You grow and change and all of a sudden there is something else to accept. I was focused on acceptance for a long time. I began working on things from my past that were difficult for me such as my addiction and the disordered eating pattern I had been immersed in for years. I began to accept that there was a power greater than myself and that power would restore some sanity to my life if I let it. I began to build what I needed in a higher power. The questions involved in NA were brilliant and helped a lot - "what does your higher power look like?" and "what do you need in a higher power?".

I had so many trust issues in the beginning, I couldn't trust in anything greater than me right away, but slowly I gained a little spirituality through the teachings I found around me. I began to understand that there is a great spirit and we all share in that spirit. It is my belief that all human beings have the same amount of spirit as do animals and the earth-no spirit is greater than or less than. I became inspired by this idea and wanted to live honestly, treating others with dignity and respect. I decided that I would not lie or cheat or steal anymore. Opening up to spirituality was monumental for me. I remember sitting on the back steps of this old house that I was staying at during this time, and just praying and crying. This was the very first time I prayed that I could actually say that there was something greater than me listening to my words. I had an overwhelming feeling that there was something guiding me and from that point forward, I went on a search to find God.

I am not judgemental, I have gone to churches, temples, mosques, equinoxes, circles, elders, and smudges. I am so grateful for all of these experiences and I feel a little wiser because of them. The meaning and values of spirituality are the same to me across all belief systems. I believe we are all equal and connected and that we all strive for understanding. I work to keep my mind open. Spirituality is what really connects us as beings full of light and love. For me that is what god looks like - understanding, wisdom, and open-heartedness.

My postpartum health was a really big focus because of my past addiction and mental health issues. I needed extra support with my baby because I began suffering suicidal thoughts. I felt so low again and coming out of that has been a big transition for me. I knew I had to get my thoughts in order and mend the gap in my disconnected thinking but it was so scary. I was suffering heavily but I knew that I was going to do whatever I needed to get better-my baby needed me. I began new medications which have helped and I have returned to my faith. I had to trust and have faith in the doctors and nurses that were helping me in the hospital. I had to work hard and prove myself as I was released on a community mental health treatment order. My infant was apprehended during my illness and I was going to do what ever it took to get my baby back! I would say to myself over and over again, "I can do this, I can do this". I accepted all of the services that were suggested and said okay to everything. I went to this mental health treatment and to that mental health treatment. I went back to alcohol and drug treatment too. I dealt with all the legal stuff left over from those days and I just kept going forward. There were injections, birth control, medications, and treatments. There were nurses, social workers, counsellors, and addiction workers. I kept speaking with KidsFirst, my therapist, addictions counselling, and my psychiatrists. There were a lot of appointments but I kept up with all of it! Now my baby is back in my home and Im working full time-I did it....and I always knew I could!



### A fairy tale world

It is funny thinking about it all now but as a kid I was such a dreamer. Every little girl or boy has a fairy tale world that they like to pretend they live in from time to time. When my adopted mother was diagnosed with cancer I began to live in a fairy tale world. When she died everything changed for me, and what kept

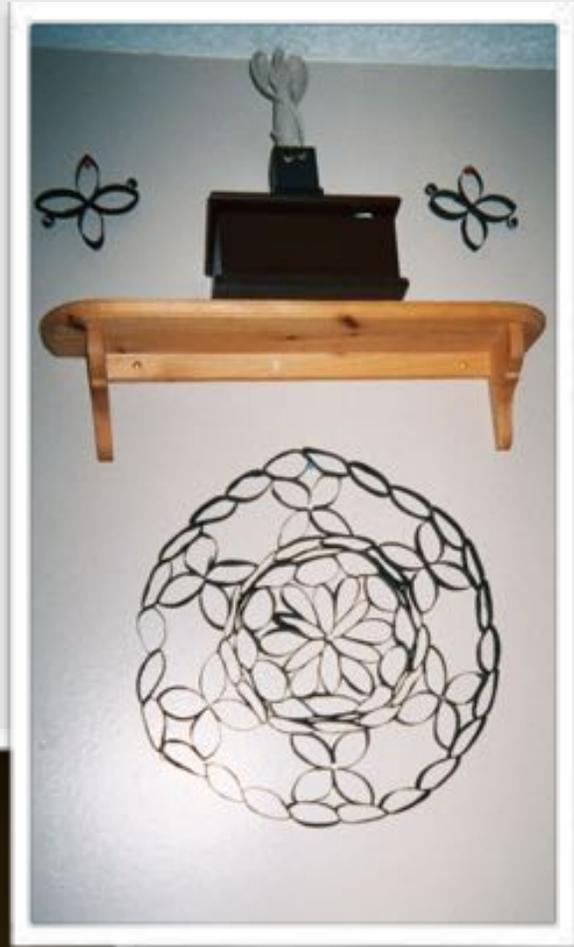
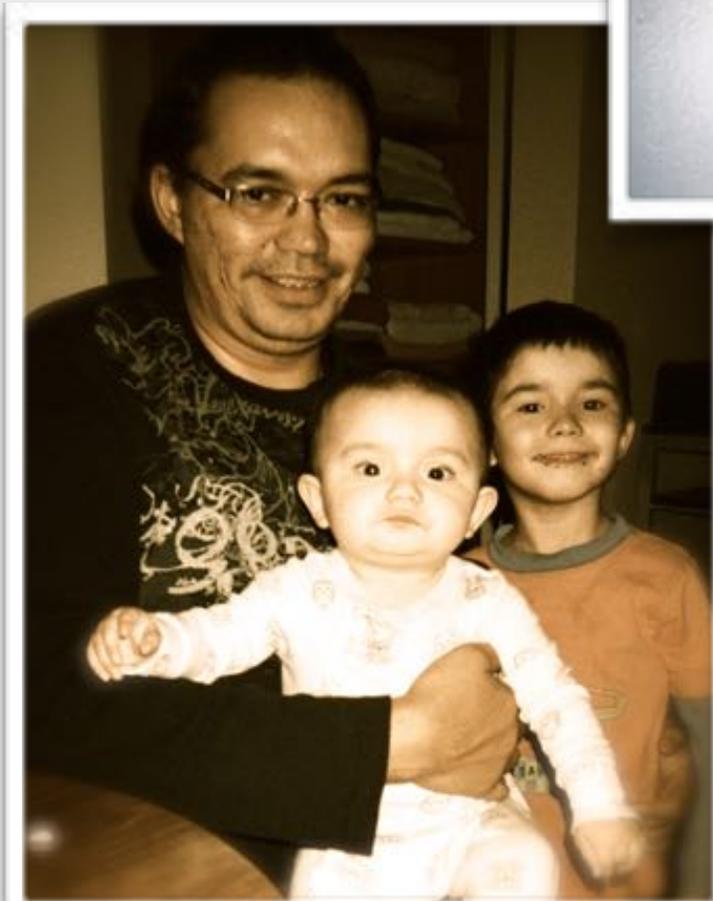


me going was escaping to my little fairy tale world. My ideal little world where my mom wasn't gone, or sick, and everything was like it was before it all happened. When my dad sent me back to foster care, I brought my fairy tale world with me. I was twelve and not only was my mom gone, but now all of a sudden my dad was gone too. I went from foster home to foster home never forming a true connection with anybody. I didn't trust anybody because as soon as I started getting comfortable with anyone, I'd be pushed away again. I started to push people away from me because I was tired of being treated so badly. I was very confused about who I could trust. I would start trusting people too soon and then I would end up getting hurt. In one of the foster homes I experienced sexual abuse. I struggled with that issue for some time. I trusted some people blindly and was hurt again because of it. I got used to men hurting me and although I was scared of them, I was also searching for love. I spent much of my time imagining how things would be in my future and in my family to come. I lived like that for years until I met my partner. I had formed a trust issue by that time but we have both grown together. My fairy tale world was protective because it kept me away from my reality. I made it through all of that crap by focusing on other things. I didn't like the way my real life was going, and it helped me to cope with it.

When I was fifteen I tried to commit suicide. I was ready to give up. I was tired of the way people were treating me! I felt my adopted mom's spirit come to me at that time, and she had a really soft look. It felt like she understood things were going to get better for me. My mother's presence has come to me at other hard times too. She was in the delivery room with me, holding my hand, when I delivered my still born daughter. She told me the experience was going to make us stronger as a family and it did.

## A true family

If it wasn't for my partner, I wouldn't have the life I have always wanted. We have come so far together in our family in the past seven years. I am still somewhat afraid of men, but I know my husband is different and my boys are different. Now that I think of it, I am really in the fairy tale world now - that old fantasy I used to escape to. I don't need my pretend fairy tale world anymore because what I had always dreamt of in my childhood has become my reality. I wanted to make my own family - a true family. I have the family that I had always wanted - my partner, our house, and three beautiful kids.



## God tends to use the broken people as hope for the world

If I wouldn't have had my daughter I probably wouldn't have survived. As far as I could see, there was no reason for me to be on the earth if it was just for suffering abuse. I knew that there was the option of abortion, but I believed that she didn't have the choice to be conceived through sexual assault or born from that situation. She had nothing to do with it and I still feel that way! My eldest daughter has had many influences in her life and many are not necessarily positive. It is hard sometimes to open up completely to my daughter, but I know she feels the connection. With my other two kids, I don't feel that same pain. I want to show her the affection and understanding that I show my younger ones.

There had been so much interference in our relationship that has made it challenging. When my daughter was a little baby I didn't feel like I had a say in things. I returned to high school because that is what everyone planned for me to do but I couldn't study because I was always thinking about my daughter. When she was able to be at childcare within the school, I could see her on my breaks which felt much better and allowed me to spend more time with her. She was such a little baby at that time. It felt like everyone knew better than I did about what was good for her, and I became confused about what she wanted. We moved into supported living apartment and it was good in many ways for us. I have always been a 'people watcher' so I would watch other parents with their kids to see how they were different. I was able to leave my abusive relationship and focus on a future that consisted of healthy choices. Through counselling I was able to build boundaries and use my own voice that allowed me to do what was right for us. My thoughts of the future are filled with hope.



### I have always valued my family

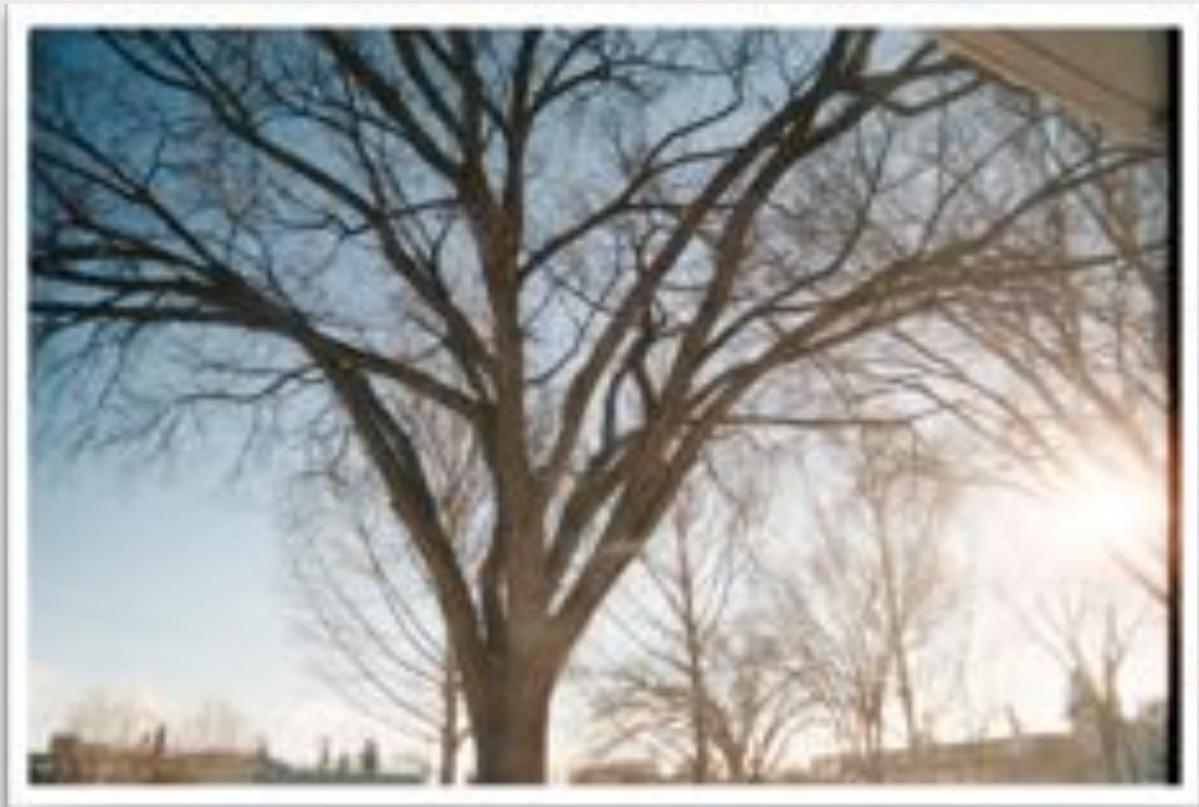
When I had my first baby, I was very young. It became very important for me to keep us safe and to stop staying in unhealthy places. My kids are the ones that keep me strong! They make me want to do greater and better things. My kids always tell me that they are proud of me! They are proud of the fact that I have a job, but they don't really like the hours. When I am working I can't spend as much time with them. My kids and my partner keep me focused. I see people going through so many struggles every day. I always wish that I could do something to help.

I never gave up on my partner. I know he has a big heart. I know he could be a better person! He's trying, and things are slowly changing. He took a parenting course last week and got a certificate. For years I wondered "what is it about drugs that makes you need them so badly?". I would always ask him and he would say that he didn't know. He would say, "it doesn't really do anything for me, it just makes me spend money and I guess it kinda makes me feel good". I didn't understand 'that' life and the whole drug thing so I constantly put him down. I realize now it only made it worse. I knew he needed help. I knew he needed to stop. I also knew that I needed to stop putting him down in order for him to get some help. He did stay sober the last time he was at home. He went to work every day and stayed away from negative people. It is something that only he can do! I can be aware of the part I play in it, but only he can do it. Even though he has put me through so much, I've put him through a lot too! He knows me. He knows if I am having a bad day. It is nice to see him changing. It feels really good because I didn't want to give up on him. We don't want to have to give up on each other.



# Knowledge & Skills:

I am going to be a better mom because of it



### Learn skills through effort

When things are tough I try to remember that 'there is no such thing as can't'. I remind myself that I am not going to get anything handed to me on a silver platter! I have always



worked hard for everything that I have. I remind myself to try, to keep going, and to not give up. My motto is 'learn skills through effort'.

### A higher power

I found a higher power and today I pray and I meditate. I venture on gaining perspective and finding wellness because I believe that is where God wants me to be. My life is steady, functional, and manageable. There is truth in my

life, not only confusion and coping mechanisms. I have awareness, clarity, and peace of mind. I feel safe, comfortable, and accepted. In meditation I can actually take in the fact that I am beautiful, smart, and capable. I am growing and becoming comfortable with myself. I have found support in Narcotics Anonymous. I am working with KidsFirst and becoming more confident.

### Being gutsy

The past two years have helped me to build up my strength. I used to be a coward, and run away from everything and everyone. For the longest time, I pushed people away, but now I am a mom and I need to reach out. Other people see a big improvement and it is so sweet. I knew I could get it together! So many people doubted me, they thought I wasn't going to make



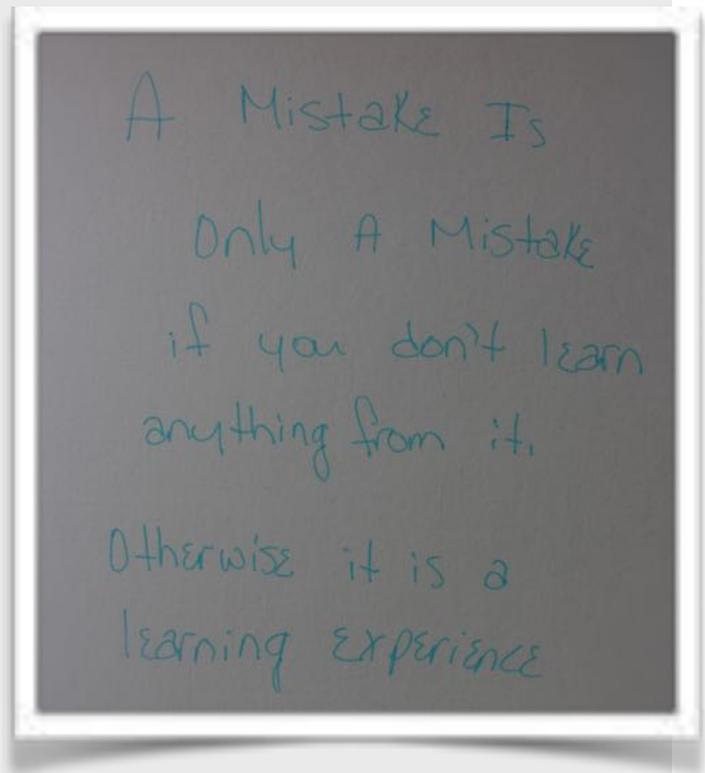
anything of my life. They thought my children would not ever live with me. Now I am doing everything I can to keep my family together and I will fight for what we have!

### Purpose is huge for me

I move forward every day. I strive for wellness. I strive for happiness. I strive for health. My purpose is my child and that is huge for me. My grandfather is my hero. He is a ninety-six year old war veteran and he pushes through every day. I will push forward too. I am twenty-five now. I value education and I am planning to go back to school. I know I am capable. I just finished a course to help women choose a career in the trades. My family and I are working together and they are supporting me.

### The hardest time for me was when my kids were gone

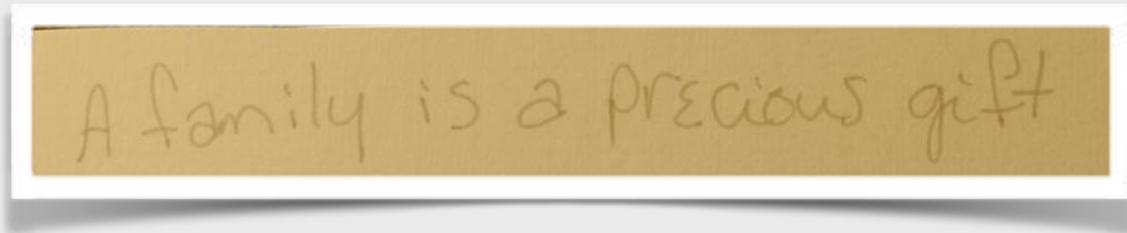
I've been through many hard times in my life, but the hardest thing for me was when my kids were gone. I had to learn to stand up for them and for myself. My family tried to support me, but my mom was stressed out by the whole thing. She told me several times that I should give my youngest babies away. I was adamant that they were my children, and I was going to raise them! Even if my kids weren't planned, they were wanted - I wanted them all! So I fought for my children. I had to prove that I was going to be a good mom. I had to outline all of my supports. I had to show social services that I could do it! It was difficult, but I had good supports and advocates in the community. In the end, it helped a lot!



### I started with these steps and after that I just kept going

When my son was one year old, I felt like it was time to start something new, something for myself. I had a good education and job in my home country, but I needed to start a new career here in Canada. We had a bigger family at home and we wanted to give our children a good life and education. Even though I was a busy mother, I decided to just try my best to re-educate and start with little steps. I would use any opportunity I had to attend programs with KidsFirst or with other community organizations and at the same time practice my English. My KidsFirst home educator would come to my house at least once a week to teach useful skills regarding parenting. I went back to the local newcomer centre again to participate in a 'drop in' conversational program and an 'English as a second language' program. I started with these first steps and after that I just kept going.

I tried my best to collect information. I did online research to explore volunteer and part-time job opportunities. I participated in a computer class and I obtained my First Aid certificate. I did educational counselling with KidsFirst because I didn't know what I should train to do here in Canada. I didn't know the details about how the education system worked. I wanted to understand the programs I could access and how I could get a diploma to allow for stable employment. My counsellor and I explored information online. We worked together! I figured out where I should go and who I should talk with to understand the next steps. I accessed drop in daycare through KidsFirst so I could participate in different educational services. My counsellor gave me lots and lots of support. Now I am slowly getting there!



### My baby was my inspiration

She was my motivator. She changed everything! My eyes are open, and my ears are open too. I feel free to express myself! I feel focused and I have self-worth today. My baby helped me to find my purpose. It was like a primal instinct to figure all this stuff out and to get my baby back! I would remind myself, "do the best you can", "stay true to yourself", and "push through it". I would tell myself, if I was suffering, that I had to do the right thing, which was to go and talk to my psychiatrist. She needed to know. That primal instinct, the maternal instinct, just took over. I just said, "okay, let's do it" to everything people suggested. I did the counselling stuff, the child protection stuff, toxic substance screens, and assessments from my doctor.

My initial relapse and hospitalization stared me in the face. I knew I couldn't keep my baby and 'use'. Whenever I would feel a craving I would remember that, and I would tell the craving that "I don't have time for you, I am busy!". My daughter brought that into my life which is an inspiration in itself. It is a process, and I am going to go through it. S#\*@ happens, excuse my language, but life isn't perfect. I needed to stay focussed, stay on my medication, and to keep the faith. I didn't get lost in my relapse. I didn't get lost in the shame or the guilt. I didn't get caught up in the birth alert or how intimidated I was initially to work with child protection. I had to take the leap and trust that they were on my team and I have received nothing but compliments from them since. My baby is coming home and that is really rewarding. It took some support and some self-acceptance! It took a bit of self-forgiveness too.

I just kept telling myself, I never want to give up!

I learned to feel and care for others from my mom. My mom has a really good heart. She has always been my role model. Even though she was a single mom who struggled with her alcohol, she always managed to take care of us and bring us up really good.

I have gone through quite a lot in the last couple of years but I have went to work every morning and we have found our way through it all. I just kept telling myself that I never want to give up! If you give up, then where are you gonna go? My life would be totally different right now if I gave up and so would my kids' lives. I would be into drugs, or anything really, if I would have gave up on myself and on them!

They saw right through the 'bad kid' label

My friends' parents helped me to get through my childhood. They saw what I was going through at home and they seemed to realize that I wasn't really that bad of a kid. They saw right through the 'bad kid' label I was always wearing. They knew that I was seeking attention because I never had it at home. I was the neglected one, the 'mistake'. I was left out of everything. My friends' parents would fight to have me over on the weekends just so I didn't have to be in my home. Without them I would have been walking around the street most of the time, doing nothing and getting into trouble.

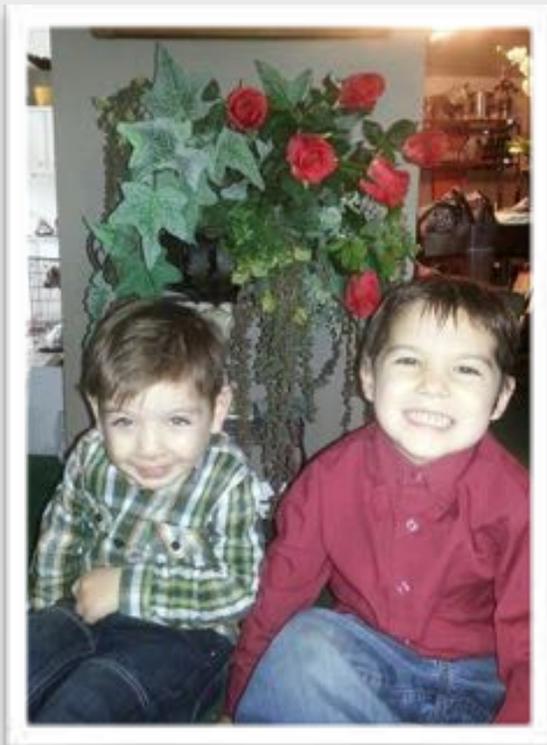


I want nothing for them but peace

I want peaceful days, happiness, and my family! I want happy kids, not miserable kids who want to run away. I hope that my children will never have to go through what I went through - ever! I never want them to have to fight for their children. I try to teach my children, while they are young, what their hands are for and they are not for hitting. I don't want any daughter of mine to grow up thinking it's ok to be disrespected by a man. It is important for my son to know it is never ok to hit girls. I don't want them to have the fears that I have or to fight like I have had to fight. My dream for my son is that he will grow up and be a 'family man'. I honestly believe that he will - he is very respectful. It is important for my children to see nothing but healthy relationships from here on out. I want nothing for them but peace.

## My Time

If you are a young mom, your whole life changes and becomes focused on the kids. A mom always has to do this or that for someone else and sometimes it's hard to feel very happy. I make art because it is 'my time'. I write because it's 'my time' too. I fit it in between spending time with the kids. I find 'my time' while they are watching cartoons or when they have gone to bed. When I was a kid I found 'my time' in the in-between times. I went to school reluctantly and only because my grandmother asked me to go, but I was always rewarded because afterwards my grandmother would help me to bake, cook, and make art. I did not like school but I loved my grandmother. I wanted to be with her as much as possible. She was warm and welcoming. She was my 'go-to' person every time my mom started up with me. I went to my grandma for everything. She was someone to sit and talk with who really cared about me.



I do everything on my own now. I spend my time with my kids during the day and I clean the house every night before I go to bed. Maybe I learned how to parent from my mom although I emulate absolutely nothing that she did. My mom wasn't there for us as kids and I remember how lonely it felt. I always wanted a mom and I didn't want my kids to ever feel like that! I want them to feel close to me and that they can come to me whenever anything happens. I know what I want for my family.

### Crank it up

Music helped me get through it all as a kid. I listened to a lot of Eminem when I was a kid and my mom hated it. My mom hated it and I loved it! Just like me, Eminem was the outcast. I would crank him up and feel good!

### My job as a mother is really important to me

I picture all of my kids doing well in elementary school and in high school. I want them to go on to university too. I want them to become something that they really want to be. My eldest daughter says she wants to become a cop or a doctor someday. She says, "I want to either take people to jail who are bad or help take care of people who are sick". My other daughter wants to get her early childhood educator diploma, just like me. My one daughter isn't sure yet (laughs), and my son just wants to finish high school to make me and his dad proud!

My job as a mother is really important to me. I have always pushed myself to be a better person and to show my kids how to be in the world. I am a good role model. I am not going to sit at home all day and do nothing. Last year, I pushed myself and kept sending out resumes. I have a great job with an Aboriginal organization. I feel like I finally made it! The best thing about my recent job change is that I am working somewhere where I feel like people respect me. I love working with children and the moms all love me. It's hard to understand at times what the kids have had to deal with in their past, but I have my own story and I don't judge the moms that live there. I always comfort the families.

I comfort the kids before they go to sleep. I always tell them not to worry because I know they miss their parents. I say, "Don't worry, you will see your mom or dad again, they are just off getting some help so that they can be better parents to you" and I hug them. Sometimes you have to hold them until they fall asleep. I see so many hurt kids and that hurts me too, but I love my job. I feel like I can make a difference. I want to go back to school sometime and become an intervention worker. All of the women that I work with keep telling me to apply because they think I would be good at it. I think so too!





### It's just me and my kids

The last couple of years, I have started knowing the right people to reach out to, and it has made a world of difference. My 'fight' has got me through hard times, because I used it to help me get my son back. I wanted to break the cycle with Family Services and I wanted it to end with me. I had three supportive Family Services workers who really worked with me to get my son home. They were never sneaky! They were always honest with me. I was able to open up to them because I felt like I could trust them. It meant a lot to me to experience how much my workers were helping, even with the smallest things. They were making sure I had everything I needed to have in order to have my son home. They even helped me take the proper steps to clear up my youth record. I really felt like they were on my side and I hadn't experienced that very much in my life. I also connected with supports like KidsFirst, a

parent aide, and a Youth Centre. I took the steps to get myself an apartment as I had to have a place to call home before I could even pursue gaining custody of my son again.

### My relationship with my family is better than ever

I was such an insecure, sheltered child, and attending Narcotics Anonymous and other groups in the community took me out of myself and helped me to realize that there are other people in the world. All people need interaction, help, and guidance. Growing up was sometimes very hard as there was lots of issues in my home. I always felt frustrated with my mom and blamed her for a lot of what went wrong. Now that I have become a mother myself, it has changed how I feel. Watching my mother's love for my daughter, and understanding how much her grandparents love their grandchild has changed things. My mom and I are working on our relationship and finding ways to support each other with boundaries between us. It's a hard road back because when I was drinking and using I was extremely selfish. I cut everyone out. I only wanted alcohol, money, or drugs.



## True Love

People come, and people go  
You learn to trust, You learn to hate  
You are taught love, You are taught respect  
People come, and people go

When people go out of your life so much  
You begin to harden your heart until one  
Day you meet that one special person

That person that makes your life worth  
getting up in the morning and fight  
A new day, you feel things that were numb inside

Feelings that have been so dead, they  
stir inside you again. You are scared to  
trust those feelings inside, but you take  
a chance on those feelings  
In a way you are glad you did because you  
feel more alive, and that is what gives you the  
strength to fight

The time you spend together is like nothing  
else in the world, time stands still every  
time you are with one another  
You know how each other are feeling  
It's an unspoken bond you share

That bond can never be broken between  
each other, they see each other and they  
know what comes next

That bond is unbreakable, and you're  
no longer dead inside. You still guard  
your heart and feelings but not as much  
you're slowly opening up and that is  
special to each other

So if people come, and people go  
just know there is always that  
one true soul mate that will be

Written by Mandi Scherr

We are practicing healthy communication and sharing our perspectives with each other. My dad and I can have a honest relationship too. There were many points because of my past that he completely shut down on me, but he is starting to open up to me again. It's nice to have my dad back! We have conversations again and he will even hug me goodbye before I leave. This is important to me because my Dad is one of my heroes.

My family has become a huge motivator for me. My relationship with both my mother and father are better and they are taking care of my daughter until I gain custody again. I am so proud of the work that I have done. I no longer have to worry that my daughter is picking up the pattern or cycle of dysfunction. I used to dwell in my misery, sorrow, and negativity. Now, if I make a mistake with something, I think, 'oh well, it doesn't look that great, but it happens'. I feel so positively about our relationship, and I really value my family. I consider how I speak to my parents around my daughter. I am a thoughtful parent and have learned many skills about connecting with her emotionally and finding ways to soothe her. It is really cool to see how my relationships are growing strong and becoming healthy. I am truly stepping into my role at this point in my life and it feels good.

#### I had no choice but to do better for my kids

It is a really hard thing to balance right now, but with the supportive people I have in my life, it's a little easier. The fact that my older two kids both have a 'big brother' and a 'big sister' really helps. We all click in a way that I never thought we would! The kids love them and they love the kids. The kids get out and are able to do their own thing! It's really great for the whole family! We all sit down and talk about their experience after they take them out. I have had no choice but to do better for my kids!

I had no choice really, it's one of those fight or flight things, and I am not one to run. I am pretty sure that is where my daughter gets it from! I had a really rough upbringing, but that is where it all began! It came down to putting on the 'boxing gloves' and standing up for myself. I am basically showing by example right now. I am not going to have my kids hurt. This is where I am putting my foot down because I'm not letting anyone hurt my kids the way I was hurt. I fight. That's what drives me - I am not gonna let anything hold us back or hold us down. I can't!

When I was fifteen I was a trouble maker. All of the young kids used to hang out with me because I would protect them even when their own parents wouldn't. I have always been like that. Nobody was there for me so I took it upon myself to be there for everybody else. I am still wrapping my head around the fact that I can't just run out and help everybody that I find anymore, but I am still 'the wall'. Now I protect myself and my kids.

## It takes courage to know there is something good inside of us

It takes courage to know that there is something good inside of us wanting to come out. I knew from a very young age that abuse wasn't right and it isn't the way I was supposed to be treated. I knew it in a way when I was teenager, but I still found guys who treated me badly - just like I was used to being treated. I might stumble along the way, but I have finally got up enough strength to be okay with being treated well. I can do this on my own two feet.



In the hard times you find out who your true friends are. I found out that was the case when I had my daughter. I made a very hard choice when I decided to place my daughter for adoption and I lost many people who I thought were my friends. I lost the respect of my own physical family because they believed that you make the baby, you deal with it - you lay in your bed. Oh God, it was hard to go against it especially when everyone thought there was only one way it should be done. It really hurt and I didn't have the support of anyone at the time. This is one of the toughest things I ever did, and it is hard for me to talk about because I was so alone. It was the ones that stuck by me that I now classify as friends and family. Those who I value, I have kept in my life but not those who jumped ship. They just didn't seem to understand. Now I know, and I stick by my friends - no matter what they are going through, I stick by them! I will be there if they need me!

I call my 'stepson' my son. I don't classify him or his siblings as my second kids. I stated that to all of them from the very beginning ... when I first started dating their dad! They always call me mom or call themselves my kids and if anybody asks me how many kids I have, I've got seven! I classify all of them as my own because it doesn't feel right to me to not include them.

### Standing side by side

People are growing and changing all of the time. It happens so fast that sometimes we are in denial of it. I need to sense the movement within my spirit. If I get triggered with drugs and alcohol, it is for me to figure out the initial signs and what is true in my body, mind, and soul. I can do that today without any shame or guilt. I have to stay true to what's going on inside of me. If I have a disordered thought, which happens and can be very disconnecting, I can do something about that! I honour myself with my peace of mind. That peace of mind comes from knowing that I make mistakes and I can 'clean it up'. I have my own truth! It's not my daughter's truth because she has her own truth. I can't take responsibility for how my daughter's life looks in twenty years, but I can take responsibility for being her mother.



I imagine two sets of feet, my daughter's little baby feet and my mamma feet, standing side by side. I think of those feet on a pathway into a beautiful forest to symbolize our journey so far.

### Doing the best I can with what I've got

My mom mistreated me a lot as a kid, but I did what I had to do to get to where I am today. I won't let my kids go through anything like what I went through! Sometimes when my family is waiting for the bus, I get glared at, I don't look my age which probably doesn't help, but I wish people would understand more. I owned up and I'm taking responsibility for my kids and I am doing what I have to do! I am not out partying! I am at home all the time! I want to shout, "don't put other people's B.S. on me because that is their 'bad', it is not mine"! I have done nothing but support my family. It boils down to either you are gonna be there for your kids or you are not, you either "step up or step out".

## My Mom says I was born singing

I learned to read and write when I was a really young girl. My adopted mother would support my writing and always asked me to write out a story and paint a picture to illustrate it. When I was older I would escape into my reading and writing in my locked room. I created this whole world where the pain did not exist. I still love to go to that world and to create. I use music and art to work through the difficult things that I have gone through. My dream is to help other people and to support healing through the arts. I started teaching myself to play

the guitar when I was twenty-six years old. I have worked as a singer/songwriter for the last ten years. I am working on my first CD this year and who knows after that, I am interested in writing a book or working on a documentary.

My mom says I was born singing! I used to sing myself to sleep when I was a baby. I used to sing when I wanted something like water, food, or a toy - I would sing it instead of just



asking. Music is part of my family history, my whole family! Uncles, aunties, sisters, brothers- it is part of us all. We are all musicians. Music is in my blood!

I wrote a song a couple of years ago called "belong". It speaks to my life story and the fact that music runs deep in my family and traditionally, storytelling is hugely important, because history is passed down through storytelling in our Aboriginal culture. There are many great storytellers that are First Nations or Métis.

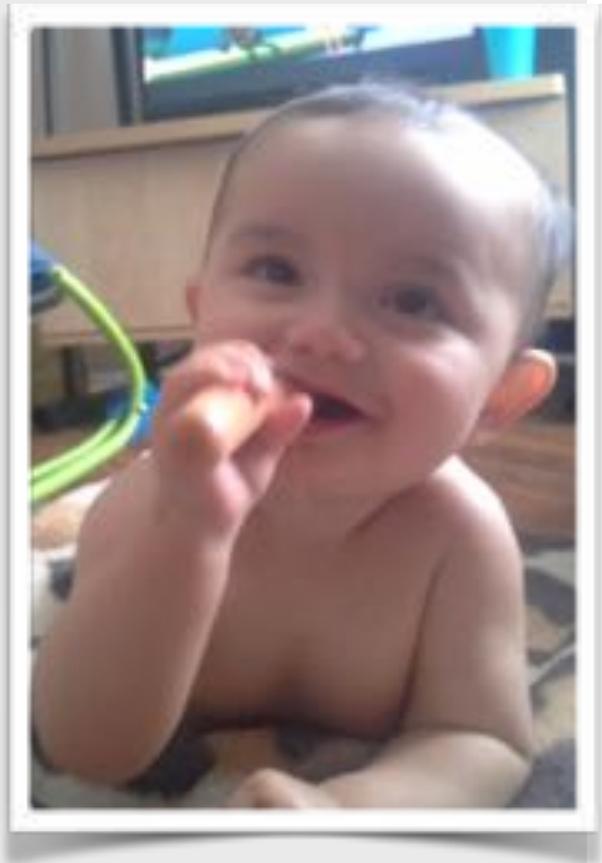


### I want my kids to speak up

I want my kids to speak up, and if something is going on, I want them to talk about it. The only way you'll be heard is if you speak up! I tell them they don't have to 'kiss anybody's butt doing it'. I want them to be able to stand on their own two feet and know the difference between right and wrong. I will help them every step of the way!

### Humour

I've got KidsFirst and some other good people in my life who are looking out for me and my kids. They are a support to me! Although I am still working through stuff, things are getting better and financially, things are getting easier. The people at KidsFirst always know that I want the best for my kids. They know that I want to support them through everything. When we lost our daughter, I found that humour was one of the best ways that we could think of to get through it. We used humour a lot. Losing our daughter brought us closer together as a family unit. Giving birth to her and participating in her memorial service together created a connection between us all. We became closer and a whole lot stronger. My 'Kookum' (the Cree First Nation word for Grandmother) used to tell me that laughing is always better than being sad or mad. She used to say, "You get a lot more done if you are happy. When you are sad or mad you won't get anything done - you will be stumbling around the world heavy-footed".



### What a sweet and warm family I have

Now I feel so lucky to have loving people and my family around me. I want to share a very sweet story that happened to me lately. I work as a waitress in a restaurant and I return from work quite late at night. The other night, my children ran out of bed as soon as they heard me come in the door. I told them both that it was time for them to go to bed and they said "Momma, momma, we really want to work for you now because you are tired". They brought me over to my chair and had a cup of water they had prepared on the table. My daughter shared that she wanted to give me a gift.

I thought she might have drawn a picture for me because she does that often and is a very talented artist, but she did not. She asked me to lean a little bit lower and into her, so I did. Suddenly, my daughter jumped into my arms and exclaimed, "Mom, it is a hug! That is the thing I want to give you! A hug!" (laughs). I felt my heart just melt! My three year old little boy was next and he raised his head so high. He said "Mom, Mom I have something for you too!" (laughs) He pushed nearer to me and said "Mom, mom come closer, come closer". He told me this in our native language which is so sweet and so funny to hear from him. So I did come closer and closer and he kissed me. "Mom, a kiss, a kiss, that is what I want to give you" (laughs). So I just kissed and hugged them both in my arms. I could feel the tears in my eyes. Even though I was so very tired after a long night at work, I swelled with the thought of what a sweet and a warm family I have! That is something precious.



### Being truly Metis

I am a public speaker. I sing and speak about the sixties scoop around the province. I speak to how my adoption has affected my life and my family's life. I talk about how hard it has been to re-integrate into the family and the heritage I was born into. I speak to how the loss of culture and language has affected me. Many of the people that went through residential schools tell me that my stories are very similar to their stories. Many people thank me for giving them voice instead of being silent. It has been important for me to put my stories together and heal through them. I talk about finding a purpose in life and living that out. I speak to the fact that a person is not truly happy unless they are truly themselves and they can love themselves. I was brought up by non-native parents and for all the sadness this has caused, I now have a foot in the white world and in the native world. I have found a way to balance and connect both worlds. This is a big deal! It is like being truly Metis (laughs)!



### Never give up

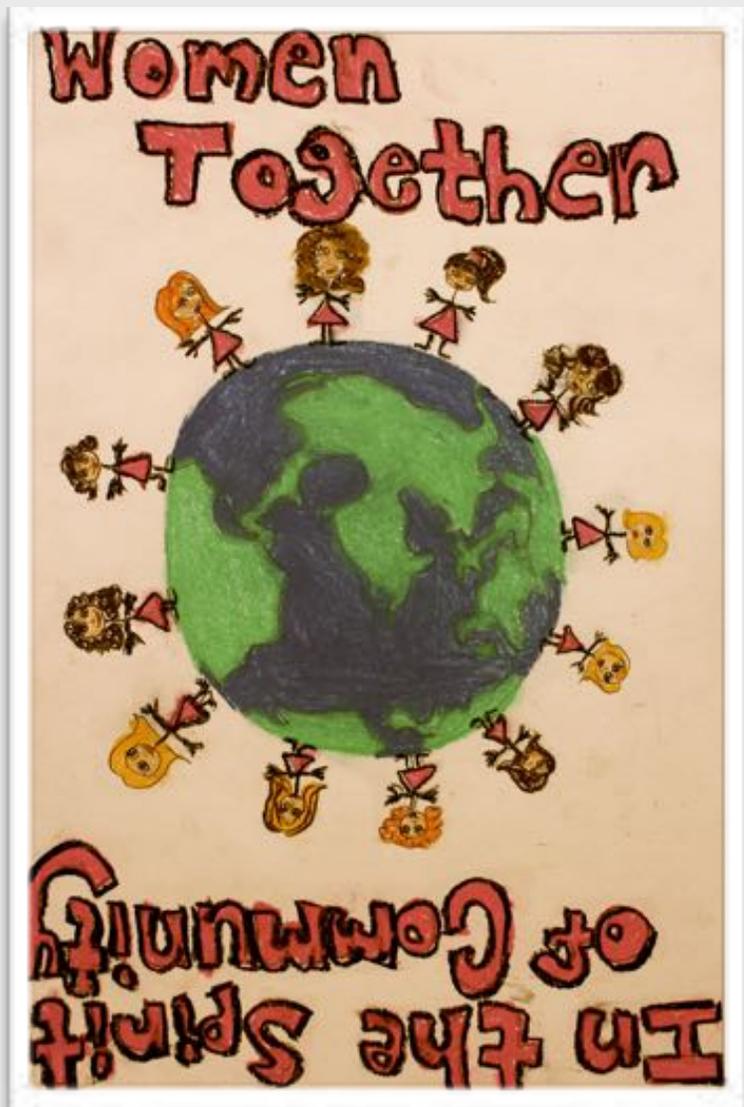
Not giving up has got me through the tough stuff. I knew not to give up because I had got through hard times in the past and I knew that I could get through them again. So I just kept fighting to do what I thought was best. I kept working and kept trying to do better for myself. I started to stay away from negative people in my life and that was very difficult because there were times when negative people were all that I had. I reminded myself that tomorrow is always a new day and things would get better for me! I want others to know to never give up because things always work out! It might not be tomorrow that it will work out, it might not be a month from now, but things always eventually get better. It doesn't matter if it is small or if it is big, a person always grows from the experiences they have. Even when I feel my absolute lowest, I always tell myself to never, ever give up because it is not worth it. I want to stand up and fight for what I have!

### Being with other women

Being with other women really helps me to feel strong. Women can relate to each other and help one another through their struggles. We can supporting one another! Families can help one another! People should support each other more but it's hard to do in our society the way things are now, especially if you are struggling to make ends meet. Without support, families that are impoverished or struggling would struggle even more!

### I value community

I value community. Community is so important because we all affect each other. When my daughter was apprehended from my care I knew that other women had gone before me and had done what I needed to do to get their family back. There is a strong spiritual connection within community. It was very important for me to experience support the last several months. It was so important for me to access and become involved with positive programs. Connecting with KidsFirst counselling and home visiting programs has helped me to feel connected again. As a mother and young woman I need this support to strengthen my value of family and community. Being with other women and supporting other women is very important to me and will continue to be throughout my life. I feel an obligation to give back and support others as I have received support. I have volunteered in the past and it feels like a good time to use my experiences and begin supporting others again.



### A family should stick together no matter what

My circle is slowly getting bigger! I would wish my family would be there for me and part of my supports, but I know that is never going to happen. I have branched off though and I am making a family of my own! To me, a family should stick together no matter what! That is not how I was brought up but it is what I want my kids to know! No matter what, I am going to be there for my kids! No matter how old they get, they can count on me to be there. As hard as it is at times to break the cycle and change, it is worth it!

### I will fight for my children

I have never been this stable for this long. There are so many things I have never done before that I am finally doing now. I have wanted to prove that I could do it for so long and now I am doing it. I knew that I could do it all along, but I didn't choose to do it before now. I made a promise to my kids, ever since my son came home, that I would never let them go again! I tell them, "no matter how sad your mom gets or how angry your mom is or how difficult the situation is, mom won't ever let you go again!" I want them to know I won't ever let them go. I do not want them to go through what I did! I want to break the cycle. Before my son came home, the social services worker I was working with remarked on how I was breaking the cycle of social services involvement and domestic violence in my family that has existed for generations. I hadn't even thought about it as a pattern before that day. I didn't even know that I was doing it and I was really shocked that I had been able to do something so important. The worker asked me how it felt to be breaking the cycle and I told her it felt and it still feels awesome! It felt so good to hear that from her that day and to know that I am breaking the cycle with my children. My kids won't have to break the cycle because I am fighting for my family! I am fighting to prevent my daughters from ever having to go through foster care or domestic violence when they grow up. I feel like crap that my son had to go through it for a time but I am thankful he didn't have to do it all his life like I had! I stopped the cycle, and I stopped it as soon as I could!



### I wanted to break those cycles

I had to break the cycle for my kids! I didn't want my kids growing up in the same family dynamic that I grew up in because it screwed me over hard core! That is what I am changing and I am changing it right now! It is a very hard thing to break, but with supportive people to help, it is a little easier.

It is stopping with me and it is not going any further! I just knew that I didn't want to be like my parents. I knew that I was not gonna be an alcoholic who goes home at night and beats my kids. That was just not going to happen in my family! I want to give my kids better than what I had growing up! People bring the way they were raised into the way they raise their children. Lots of people are too scared to speak up because they were taught at such a young age not to use their voice. That this is how the cycle goes on and on.

### The most important thing to me would be my family!

I did it for myself and for my kids. I want my kids to know that just because there was addiction and abuse in my upbringing, that it's not going to mean that they are going to

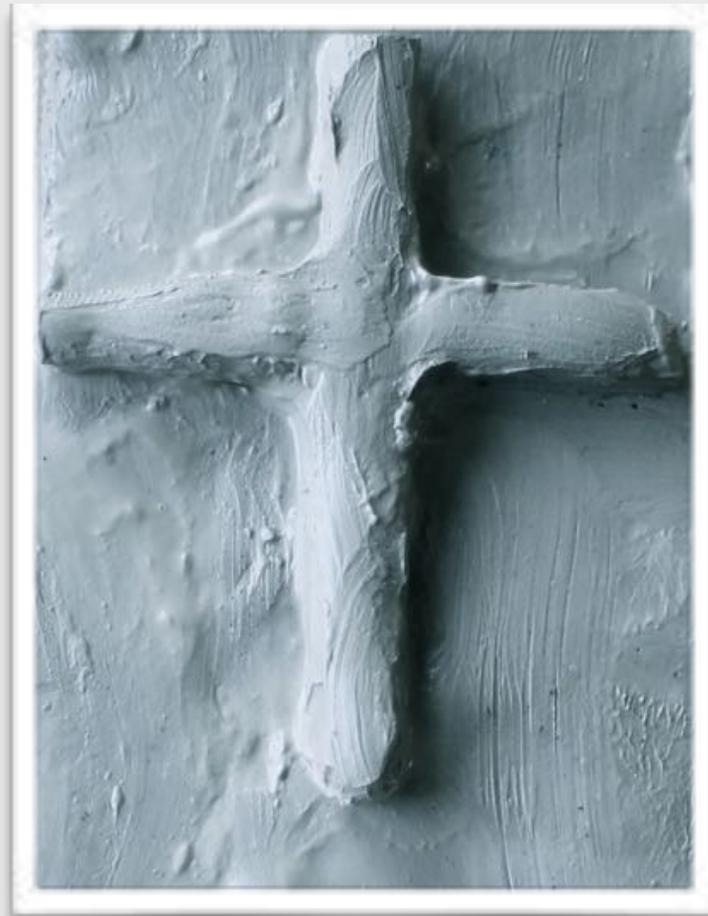
be brought up in that way! I am not going to do it! It's stopping with me and it is not going any further!

### When I didn't have anyone I started reaching out to resources

When I didn't have anyone I started reaching out to resources. There was nobody around to tell about my issues so I just started reaching out to the resources in the community. I had no family to turn to but now I honestly prefer my friends and community because they are there for me when I need them. There is a lot less drama and less frustration.

### Knowing that God loved me

Praising God helped me. Prayer helped me and knowing that God loved me. He wanted me to get through the tough stuff and he hoped for a better future for me.



You gotta find that place where you can go and be who you are meant to be!

I have to keep pushing through! It is hard to feel empowered when you've been pushed down all your life, but sharing stories helps me to find the strength to rise above the struggles. There is always going to be struggles and there is always going to be people that we don't like in our lives, so we have to just work through it. It is our struggles that build our character and shape the kind of people we become. I don't want us to be bitter, resentful, and stuck in the past; I want more for us!

I want us to keep pushing for a better future for our kids and to be empowering to each other. I don't want people to leave me crippled for my whole life and I don't want that for you. Everybody's got to find that place where they can go and be who they are meant to be! I have hope things will get better!

### A revolution occurs

When you find those people or those resources that are actually good for you, positive things start to happen in life. It starts with just one person who can see past the negative and a revolution occurs. Someone else cares about you and starts pulling those strengths out and everything changes. A person won't have the same negative thoughts like they had before if somebody else actually cares or sees something good instead. These different thought processes lead to a person feeling like they can care about themselves and everything begins to change!

### A gift in feeling for others

When other people see what is good in you or when they start to see the gifts you have to offer other people; it is a big deal because then you begin to understand the gifts you have yourself. Things become easier because you have that person and that 'gifting feeling' to push the negative thoughts and people away. If you only have negative, then that is where you go - well, at least until you find something else.

### Serenity

Watching my mom drink my whole life may have been what started my wanting to help other people. I wanted so much to help her so much and to this day I still want to help her but I have learned to take a step back from her because I have realized that I can't help anyone to change who doesn't want to change. The serenity prayer has helped me through this in my life, especially the line that says, "God grant me the serenity to accept things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference".



### Doing it differently for the next generation

I would never have made the changes that I have made if I hadn't had my first child. The change began with her because it was then that I began noticing the resources and opportunity for change in my community. She is the why and the how I began to break the cycles in my family. Now I have three children and with my two little toddlers it seems to be getting easier. Getting the courage to do it is the first step and changing things is the second. I am the person who defines my future and right now I define my kids' future too.



### I'm trying to do it right for me and for my kids

Sometimes old friends and partners can be frustrating. I am trying to do what is right for me and for my kids, but it can seem like some people in my life don't want me to make those changes. It feels like old friends and even my partner is trying to keep me at his level even when I don't want to be there anymore. This is one of the reasons finding that support is so important.

### Talking with people has helped

Talking with people has helped me. Having relationships where we help each other in hard times has also meant a lot. It feels like we have arrived at some peace now within our family after being out for a long time in the harsh wilderness. It seems to me that we are walking together side by side now, and coming up on another world. I imagine us as having traveled a path together through many different terrains - in the distance it is rough and rocky with a dense overgrown forest but I know that a cool and calm meadow lies ahead. Of course, sometimes it is calm and peaceful, and sometimes it gets hard and rough, but if a family keeps pushing forward they can get through it no matter what!

### Waiting and seeing

In First Nations philosophy, a person will trust another person until they know a person can no longer be trusted. Maybe this is how colonization happened in Canada; the Aboriginal people trusted the newcomers before they found out they could not be trusted. Maybe once they found out, it was all too late. I also trust people directly unless they give me a reason not to, I don't know why but I do know it is how I have always done it. I tend to trust people before I know that I cannot trust them. Once I know I cannot trust you though, you are out! I have certain laws now to protect myself. I simply watch others more. I have been burned in my life before but I am now getting better at 'waiting and seeing' and keeping myself safe.

### My strength

My strength during hardships comes from my family and friends. I also have a wonderful counsellor and a great mentor who have supported me through some rough and tough times.

### Empowerment is a good word

A person no longer needs to be dependent on people who aren't even good for them! There are many people that are dependent on other people for their happiness and their well-being. People depend on others to make their decisions. If a person doesn't have the confidence in themselves, it is easy to depend on others. My focus over the last few years has been on God and spirituality. I love Aboriginal culture so much because that's what they are all about. The whole basis of Aboriginal knowledge is creation. Everything that we have is because of the Creator. I believe confidence, independence, and security can come from spirituality. A person can feel lonely in a room full of people, but if you're getting empowered by another source or another person, then that loneliness just goes away. It is replaced with a confidence that you have in yourself and you may be alone, but you are not lonely. It is my faith that holds me through.

### A unique ability

My childhood and my marriage left me with a unique ability to read other people. I can sense the type of person someone is as soon as I meet them, and I can see when someone is putting up a facade. I can feel what mood a person is in quite quickly. People seem to open up to me as soon as they meet me. People can feel my strength. After hearing my stories, many people tell me that they feel inspired. A friend of mine recently shared with me that she is able to go forward instead of going backward because of my sharing my experiences. She figures if I can make it, she can make it - and she is right! Connecting to and helping people keeps me going in the hard times.

### Being an advocate

I want to become a social worker to prove myself. I want to help people who don't have a voice. It is hard with all of the judgement in our society, and people need someone brave enough to stand up and help. When some people are faced with the system, they shut down right away. They lose that hope and drive to do better because some things have been taken from them that shouldn't have been taken. It will be difficult at times because you must be political to fight the system. Groups and organizations exist because they want some sort of say or control. I think it depends on how the group is going to use that control. I want to think critically about the groups and people I let into my life. Is the group using its sway for a healthy reason or unhealthy reason? Are others going to be hurt in the process? How does it influence people?

### People who are positive help a person to bring down the door

There are times when I don't see the negatives in others and I don't notice the people who are going to hurt me before it's too late. Sometimes it can come in an obvious way and sometimes it can be very subtle. It is having people who are positive in our lives that help a person to bring down the door.

I have people in my life that have changed the way that I think about myself. I also seem to be attracted to people that have issues in their lives. I have struggled too, so people get the fact that I actually know what it feels like to be hurt. It feels good to have people in your life who are balanced and have strength in themselves. It sometimes feels strange when someone is accepting, caring, and a good friend. It feels a little bit off, but I am working to trust it more. You need to give it time and test the waters. Usually it doesn't take too long to sense if they are a good person or not, but I have gotten burned a few times. I think the first stage is getting a feel for relationships and getting comfortable with others. The second stage is actually having the courage to do something about it and reach out. For me, it was learning to use my voice by speaking out. People need the opportunity to be in a safe place to have their voice come out. It helps a person feel more comfortable and confident. That is why it is good to have a counsellor and to find the right people. You can gain the ability to use your own voice in counselling, which has helped me a lot.

### Humour carried me through

Humour has carried me through so many hard times. I have lots of humour and that is a good thing! My kids use humour too. My adopted dad is really funny. He has the humour of Aboriginal people. He teases you if he likes you. He teases himself. He makes fun of a bad situation by seeing it in a different light! My brothers and sister have the same sense of humour. I remember my sister and I laughing all night when we knew we were safe in our own little world. My sister would sneak into my room and we would tell stories. We would share our secrets and laugh and tease each other. There was a lot of laughing between us two!

Right now in my life I am in a very hopeful place. I feel like the dreams that I have dreamt since I was little are all coming true. I want to help other people, which has been a big thing for me all of my life. I know there are many women and young people who are where I was for so many years - stuck in hopelessness and despair. I spent so many years hating my life, but now I am thankful. I love my kids and I love my life.

### *I will walk through storms*

I fight as hard as I can to keep my family happy. I would like to help families going through the same things by telling our story, so other people know they are not alone. It feels good to help out. I am happy to share my experiences to help other people. If some of the struggles we had to fight through support others to

know that they can get through it and overcome it, that would have a great impact on me. There has been many times in my life where I wanted to throw in the towel, give up and say to hell with this life, but I didn't because I knew that one day I would have something to fight for...and I have that now, even though I didn't have it when I was little. I have always reminded myself that there is a light at the end of every tunnel. It doesn't matter who you are or where you come from! It was just me back then and I grew up to depend on myself. I kept telling myself that I would have somebody else down the line to take care of or be happy with. I always knew that one day I would not be so alone.



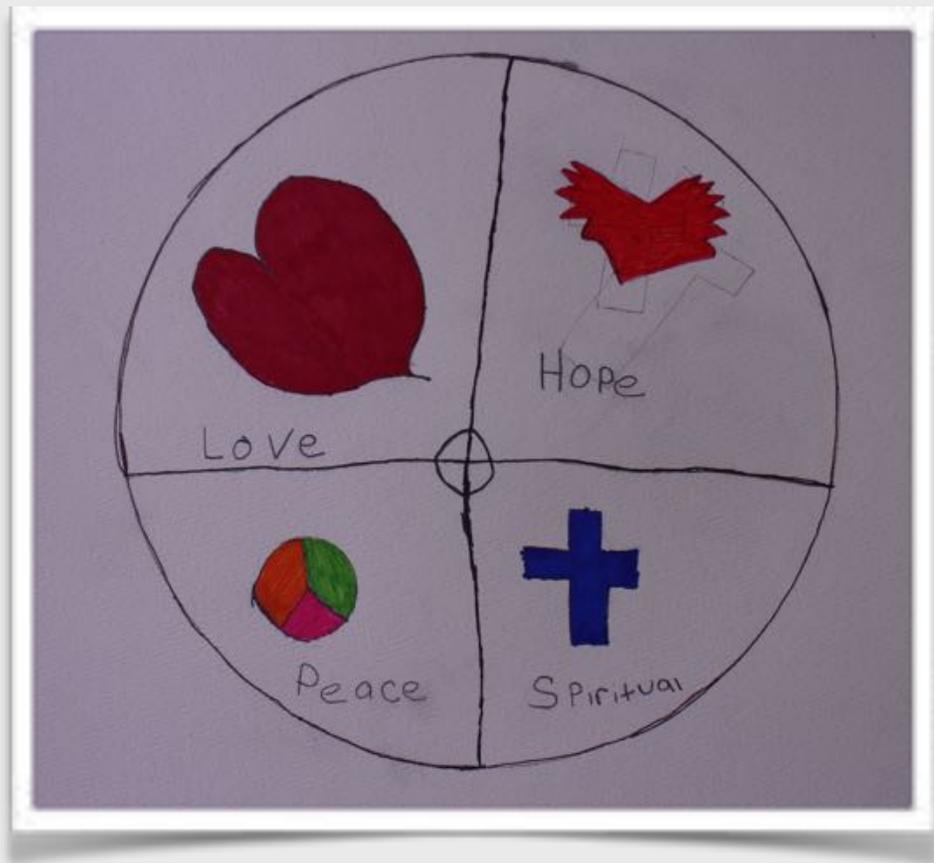
### Inviting positive people

When we first started as a family, we used to let anybody come around us, even if they were hurtful, and it was just horrible. We have started pushing the negative people away and keeping a boundary around us. Life got much better when we invited more positive people around our family. In the past, I would start trusting somebody and they would show me that they could not be trusted. This would happen especially when people struggled with alcohol or drugs. We are much more careful now. We watch and see what people are going through, even with their families. Sometimes they can be good people, just bad for us as a family to hang around. We notice when people hold different values from ours.

### I'm on my way to get my goals now

I'm on my way to get my goals now. I am working, I am studying, and I am taking care of my kids. I am taking English classes to improve my English skill level. I will soon apply to the post-secondary program I have chosen. I am so fortunate now. Even though I am sometimes tired by it all at times, I am much, much stronger and I won't give up a thing! I am on my way to a better future. At this point, I feel very confident. I know there are many people who love me

and care for me - my husband, my family and all the people from KidsFirst. I am not lonely even though there are many things I have to face by myself and do for myself. I have people who are always there for me! I can get support and encouragement from them. Even though I no longer see them, I can always get energy from them (laughs).



### I feel warm feelings in my Heart

I don't know how to say the specific professional names of those skills I learned from KidsFirst, but I do understand how they work and I use them in my life. A few years ago, when I was in the middle of a very difficult time, I felt very cold and weak in my heart but now I know I have a stronger heart. I feel warm feelings in my heart. I feel energy there again. I have love in my heart and I hold the warm memories there from all the people who have cared for me. They are all in my heart.



### I can figure it out

I value love. I value connections with the people that I love. All of it makes me feel stronger and confident and because I now have so many memories in my heart, I feel that I can do anything! My memories and all of the things that have happened over the past few years between me and KidsFirst have really, really made a difference in my life and in my body. I know that even when I face difficult times in the future, I can go back in my memory and pick that feeling up once again. I will remember that I am stronger now and that I know how to figure it all out!

# Sharing Our Stories:

I am inspired by each of these stories and the strength that they have!



### You can change things

I want to help other mothers and families to know that they can actually get through it! That they can change things! I want them to know not to give up, just keep pushing yourself and you can become a better person. You can change things!

### A community among women

I love the purpose behind sharing my story.

I believe that the community among women is so important. It is so important for women to lift women up especially in terms of challenges and struggles, and I think this is the purpose of this book.

It is so important to know when we walk down the paths of life that other people have also walked them. That is how I like to think of things now. That I am walking down this path - I go through challenges, opportunities and aspirations. I have my goals. I am doing this all because I have to, but also, who knows, my journey could have a spirit of its own. It might connect with another person's spirit and their journey. I think that it is this connection that can give us a sense of community!

### People need someone to be proud of them

I have such a big heart. Even people I barely know will notice my heart. I always say if a person is doing something good, even if they struggled in the past, then they are a good person. I want to be proud of them! If no one is proud of a person, the person is likely to give up. They will turn to drugs and the streets. I've seen that struggle, I see it every day in the neighbourhood. I see people everyday going to their programs, pushing themselves to stay off drugs and trying to become better parents. These people need someone to see them. They need someone to be proud of them!

### I've always wanted to help other people

If there is a girl out there who is going through a similar situation, I just hope that my story can help her and inspire her. I know what it is like to feel lost, hopeless, and scared. I get it! I know what it is like and I don't wish that upon anyone. I hope that others will know that they can also make it through it!



The hard stuff just makes you that much stronger in the long run!

The reason I want to share my story is because I have seen a lot of women give up and I want people to know that you can't give up! You have got to push through - you have got to do what you got to do! Don't give up when it gets hard! There is a lesson in everything! The hard stuff just makes you that much stronger in the long run!

We all hope for a better future

I want to share my story because I think is important! I went through a lot in my life and I think my story might help somebody. I also want to tell my story to realize where I have come from and what has brought me here. It has been a long process and I am still not done, but we all have hopes and dreams for our lives and hopes and dreams for our children. We all hope for a better future.

My real story

I hope to tell my real story to other moms. I know they will totally understand since we are all moms and I am telling my real story. I want to help other women learn by sharing my experiences and skills. It might help if a mother is in a similar situation to know that there was another mom out there who also felt that way. Maybe they will read my story and understand that I tried my best to learn and to practice something else. Maybe there will be something in my story that she can use in her life, and it could help her and her family a little. I remember how hurt and alone I was when my babies were little, and I hope that my real story and my experiences can help another mom feel just a little bit better.

Speak up and be heard

There are a lot of people that don't know how to get their word out there! No matter what you've been through, people have got to realize it is not the time to keep your mouth shut anymore! You gotta be able to speak up and be heard or else nothing is ever gonna change!



## Every story is different and every struggle is different

I wanna share my story because me and my little family have gone through a lot in the last year and honestly I don't how we are getting through it, but we are! Everybody's story is different and some people's lives are more difficult than others. For me, you've got to believe in yourself and see the strength that you have to know you can make it!



### Being a voice

I want people to know who are in similar situations that there is light at the end of the tunnel. My grandmother was the one that knew I would be doing something! She knew that I would stand up for somebody that didn't have a voice, and that I would want to give somebody a voice who was too scared to speak. I know what it is like because I couldn't have a voice when I was growing up.

I want other people to see that we have a say too! The silence is political as the minority doesn't have a lot of say. Don't be scared to stand up and say something about it! Sharing my story is a way of fighting back and being a voice for those that don't have one. I want to live in a world where people aren't afraid to speak up! I want to live in a world where people aren't afraid to get help and to give the help. I broke away from how I was raised and the things that I was taught by. I want others to find where they belong!

### I realize now that I did have the knowledge but I never used it before

I want moms or dads who are struggling and fighting to get their kids back, to know that it can be done. A person needs to use the proper steps and to get support to stay ahead of the game. You can get it together, I promise you can! I know it doesn't always feel like you can and that the whole child protection thing can make you feel really bad. But we are all only human. We fall on our face once in a while, but it doesn't mean we can't pick ourselves up and get going again. I have done it how many times now and I'm still alive. For me it was about opening my eyes and really seeing things for what they were. It was a real spiritual awakening.



### There is a lesson to be learned in everything

When people are ready to open up and tell their story, it is usually because they are in a really good place. In doing so, a person has to peel back these layers. To wonder why and look for the deep down core reasons that have moved you to change! It is those reasons that will keep you going when the road gets rough!

### I want to Help Others

I want to help others by sharing my story. I want to share so my children can be proud of their mother, and also my family, friends, and supports. I am strong and I am getting stronger every day. I always ask for help when I need it now, and I lean on others when I need it. I reach out to positive people in my life. I still isolate myself at times even though I know I shouldn't but I go out in the community often. I feel accepted; much more than I did before. I am slowly learning how and who to trust again.

### Empowerment

I want to be positive. If I share my story and it has a positive impact on somebody or makes waves to support political changes, it would be very empowering for me. It could place a person in a different position. A position where both yourself and others recognize your power, your courage, and what you stand for! Empowerment is important for me.



A bit more about KidsFirst:

KidsFirst brings families together



A mother protecting the ones she loves.

The storm is to represent chaos and the dragon is protecting the kids from it”

### She was my saving grace

I learned a lot from both of my grandmothers; the one who hurt me and the one I loved. I always vowed that when I had kids I was not going to repeat any of the abuse! I had to learn very fast who I could trust and who I could not. When I met my counsellor from KidsFirst, I was weary. I knew I had to trust someone and ask for help, but it wasn't easy. I had always had an underlying fear that I couldn't really trust anyone else to help. It was a fear that the rug is going to get pulled from underneath me. I knew I had to do it but I didn't want to completely put my trust out there because I had been hurt too much in the past. I worried if I gave people an inch, they would take a mile; even with my kids. I didn't want anyone or need anyone walking all over me. As I kept seeing my counsellor, the words from my other grandmother became stronger. She always knew what I was going through and she tried to protect me. I would feel little bits and pieces of my grandmother speaking through my workers at KidsFirst. When I became involved with social services, I almost lost hope but she started to send me little signs here and there and was with me often when I would see my counsellor. I even hear bits and pieces of my grandmother with everybody at the narrative group and I know she is here now.

She was my angel. She was my saving grace. I wish my grandmother was still alive; my kids would have loved the woman, just like I did. Every time I think about her, I hear the song 'Amazing Grace' and every time I hear that song, I think of her. Some days I feel like she is still looking after me. I get little validations here and there showing she is still looking out.

### KidsFirst helped me to stay connected

My counsellor and KidsFirst helped me a lot. I don't think I would have made it through without being able to share with someone. I didn't have many female friends or family who would have understood. KidsFirst helped me to stay connected.



## It all boils down to heart

All you need is good supports and you are good to go!

I realized that I could do things on my own with the help of KidsFirst. I was taught that there is always supposed to be that guy in the picture to help. I realized once I had the kids, my partner didn't want them so it was hard trying to work that through. I now realize that I don't need a guy to be there, especially because he is not there, to help me to raise my kids.

Learning to lean on others was a hard thing for me because I had been hurt by so many people. I recently graduated from the KidsFirst program and that was kind of a scary thing for me because I really learned to trust the people there, but it was also a good thing to do because I was ready.

### With other mothers

I remember a KidsFirst group that I attended with other mothers which was all about connecting with your kids and understanding both their emotions and your emotions. It



is still a very warm memory for me and for my daughter who remembers the big muffins we had with the other 'aunties' there. I used all of what I learned in the group in my life and it worked. I have always wanted to become a good mom and learning those skills was really important to me. It helped me to connect with my children and to create a better relationship with them. Our connection gives them confidence. It has been very important to us as a family and has helped my kids to grow in healthy way. As mothers, we are the first teachers for kids in their lives. It is hard to describe in words, but I am totally different than I was five or six years ago. I became involved with KidsFirst because I wanted to learn to be a better parent.

I use to discipline my kids in a hard way because I didn't know any other way. I had so much anger in me because I always felt like a bad mom. I would tell myself that I was a bad mom but now I don't. I am working hard every day. It is all about me and my kids. My family and friends always give me the message that I am a good mom and a hard worker. That makes me feel so good because that really wasn't me before. KidsFirst helped me become a better mom. KidsFirst helped me to see that I had a future,

that I didn't have to sit on welfare, and that I could get somewhere in my life. KidsFirst helped me to not give up on me!

### If I open myself up a little bit more sunshine can come into my heart

When I first arrived in Canada I was all by myself. The only person I could talk with was my husband and we would often fight. I didn't have anyone I could trust with my thoughts and my feelings. In my culture, there is a traditional belief that people should not share personal aspects of their lives with others, especially the hard times. 'Don't bother others' is a normal thought for people in my culture. We are shy to share our emotions even with our best of friends, and would usually only share our feelings with our family members. When I became connected to KidsFirst, I realized that if a person needed support there were people out there to give it. It is important to tell supportive people how you are feeling! It can make you feel much better! I know now that many organizations and people care about me. People need to open up and talk to feel better. If I open myself up a little bit more sunshine can come into my heart. There were so many people at KidsFirst we could share and connect with as a family - we have learned a lot! I've started to get into this communication thing! I started out so hurt in my heart, but now I am in this community and I am not lonely anymore. If I need help there are so many people I can ask. It all boils down to heart! My little girl loves to draw pictures with hearts. If I was to draw a picture to illustrate my experience, it would have to be a heart surrounded by many hearts and hands. The hearts in the picture are so sweet, so warm, and so close to each other. We kept connecting with KidsFirst. If I had an emergency, I would call them and they would be there to help. I really appreciated that I could count on the help, and I will never forget it.



KidsFirst gave me the opportunity to grow up - to look to myself, understand myself, and improve myself!

When I started to work with KidsFirst, I worried that other people would think I was a bad mom or a crazy woman, but no one did. I felt cared for and encouraged. I learned that nobody is perfect and that I always tried my best. The people at KidsFirst always let me warm my heart. It helped me to feel better. I want to help other moms and kids with what I learned. I have learned a lot and I want to share and help other people. Some day when my kids are grown up, I will tell them my story. They were so very young but they still went through those hard times with me. In their little hearts they may have sometimes felt a little bit worried or scared, so when they are big enough I will tell them the whole story. They will know that even though the difficulties in life can make you feel very hurt or tired, there is always something that the bad times can teach you. Maybe it is normal for people going through difficult times to feel shame about those things, but I want to say thank you for those bad experiences because it made me! It gave me opportunity to grow up, understand myself, to look to myself.



### People who are positive in our lives bring down the door

One thing I have learned is that I have to open up in order for people to understand. I wouldn't have been able to get through this without people being there with me, this is also about us honouring the people who have helped us get through it all too. You know I don't think I would be where I am today without KidsFirst and those supports that were there with me.

It is all about helping each other and I want to honour those who have been there to stand with us and give them some credit. All you need is good supports, and you are good to go! I have had to utilize a lot more in the last eleven months than I have ever had to have in my entire life. It hasn't been easy but I know KidsFirst is still here! No matter what goes wrong, you can do it! You just have to actually believe in yourself! If it wasn't for KidsFirst being with me, I wouldn't be where I am today!

### I keep getting stronger through everything I say and do.

I became involved with KidsFirst when I became pregnant with my last child. It was with a guy who cannot see his son unless he is supervised. He was deemed a danger to my other children and the whole situation was difficult. Before KidsFirst I didn't go anywhere. I was a loner. With the help of KidsFirst, I started going out more, and joined activities. I went back to school a couple years later and graduated from grade 12. My KidsFirst counsellor also got me going to new groups. I started going to a community group and met some great people and supports. All I can say is that if it wasn't for KidsFirst, I wouldn't be where I am today.

I keep getting stronger through everything I say and do. I am opening up to more people as I am an extremely shy person. I am meeting new people.



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