



Christy's Story: How I Broke the Cycle by Getting My GED



At 15, Cristy Lopez felt a distinctive flutter in her stomach that changed the course of her life: the kick of her unborn child. In that terrifying and remarkable moment, she decided her life—and that of her child—was worth saving. She had already endured a lifetime of struggles, including domestic abuse, rape and attempted suicide; but her biggest challenge was yet ahead: becoming a teen mother.

A single mother struggling to balance school and motherhood, Christy dropped out of school to take care of her newborn. She initially had support from her mother, but when their relationship became strained, she was forced to live with

her baby in a shelter at 17.

Christy's experience with domestic abuse continued into her adulthood, this time at the hands of her partner. She became pregnant again at 19. She realized that she was creating the same environment for her children that she was trying to avoid, allowing a vicious cycle to arise.

Feeling alone and abandoned, with one toddler and pregnant with another, she began by reaching out for resources to help guide her in the right direction. Determined to stop the cycle, Christy made a commitment to her children and set out to get her GED.

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FALL FUNDRAISERS



Community Place recently celebrated two fantastic fundraising events! On September 21, we welcomed a crowd of over 400 people to the Radisson Rochester Riverside Hotel to listen to our special guest speaker Dr. Steve Perry, America's Most Trusted Educator. Dr. Perry addressed the problems that we are currently dealing with in our school system and offered advice on what we can do as parents, teachers and students to make an effective change. Dr. Perry then addressed our youth directly in an afternoon Q&A session.

On October 5, CPGR once again participated in the George Eastman House Photo Finish 5K. This year with the help of our sponsors, donors and three times as many walkers and runners we raised \$8200 - more than triple our amount from last year. Congratulations to Markus Sherman, son of our new Board Chair Rita Sherman, who placed 2nd in his age group (male 13-19) at 22:13!

Life Lessons

From troubled teen to Life Coach, Jessmarie Sanchez's journey at Community Place spans nine years. She uses lessons she's learned in her life to educate, uplift and motivate her students.

Life Coach Jessmarie Sanchez looked one of her students in the eye as she explained to her that abuse does not equate to love, and went on to share her domestic abuse story that continued for four unnerving years. This defining moment brought her full circle, as she thought about her experiences as a participant in Community Place's Student Leadership Academy some years ago.

When Jessmarie first came to Community Place at 13, she felt standoffish – she didn't know anyone and didn't want to be there. But after spending time talking to the other youth in the program who were dealing with a lot of the same problems, she started to enjoy the atmosphere and recalls how homey it felt.

"Walking into a classroom of different ages of youth that didn't have homes and were in deeper situations than I was in really changes your perspective. After seeing their situation, I realized I can't complain anymore," Jessmarie says.

But Jessmarie also faced her own challenges. She became pregnant when she was in the program and says that her Community Place mentors and cohort became like an adoptive family, providing her with constant support to get her through the hardest time of her life. She was grateful for their outpouring of unconditional love and kindness that came in the form of baby formula, rides to doctor's appointments and simple inquiries about her day. For that reason, she tries to keep in contact with them to this day.

Jessmarie credits the program for changing her life for the better—making her a more mature and stable mother and giving her the knowledge and support she needed before entering adulthood. Realizing how invaluable that was to her, after graduating from the program and high school, she set out on a path that would allow her to work with children in the same capacity. For three years, she's been a valued member of the youth services program, for which she has volunteered and is now a paid employee.

Jessmarie won't hesitate to tell you that she loves her job and even when she's having a bad day, says coming here gives her a renewed sense of warmth and positivity. She enjoys the fulfilling task of educating students, helping them understand their surroundings so they will make informed decisions, and guiding them through social and academic problems.

By being so open about her life and the choices she's made, she hopes she can create a safe, judgment-free environment for her students. This also opens them up for healing, she says.

"I want them to know that I am as real as I can be. I have been through a lot and they know it all. I just think that when they see how open I am, it will

make them want to be open as well," Jessmarie says.

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Exchange Students Lend a Helping Hand

This summer, Community Place had the wonderful pleasure of hosting a special visit by students attending Leeds Metropolitan University in Leeds, England through the International Service Exchange program with Nazareth College.

During their two-week excursion, from June 29 to July 13, a dozen volunteers provided countless hours of service to clients in our Family Emergency Services, Summer Camp and Senior Center programs.

Through one-on-one activities, the program nurtured relationships between the volunteers and clients--both young and old. The volunteers took an active role in our programs by assisting with food distribution, supervising instructional and educational activities, and communicating with the clients.

Their trip also included visits to sites and attractions in Western New York, such as Niagra Falls, Eastview Mall and a Red Wings game.

We would also like to say thank you to all the volunteers, coordinators and CPGR directors who made this possible. We are looking forward to the students' next visit in summer 2015.

Please contact Valarie Upson at (585) 327-7200 ext. 102 for information about individual and group volunteer opportunities.

"It's been a wonderful and culturally-enriching experience. It was great seeing the relationships between the children and staff. I have benefited immensely—from my improved confidence to my greater appreciation for what I already have. This experience has made me realize how we often take for granted life's simple necessities, which others may not have access to."

--Aqsa Mohammed, LEEDS 2013



Christy's Story

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"Everything that was done was done for them. It took a long time to realize I had the power within myself," Christy says.

At the recommendation of a friend, Christy enrolled in a GED program at Community Place in June 2012. Christy says it was the only program of its kind that allowed her to balance her work and home life. It also offered a practical structure that helped her retain the material and course instructors that were understanding and supportive. After only two months of classes, she passed the test with flying colors.

With her GED in hand, Christy, now 21, feels more confident and invincible than ever before and plans on enrolling at MCC and continue on her path to becoming a Social Worker. Christy is also working on a series of books that chronicles her life journey. Christy hopes that through her words and work, she will be able to guide and inspire other young people facing similar situations.

Ways You Can Support Community Place

Want to help out our community but don't know where to start? You can:

- Donate directly on our website: <http://www.communityplace.org>
- Adopt a Family for the Holidays! (call 585.288.0021 for details)
- Roc The Day for Community Place on 12/11/2013! <http://www.roctheday.org>
- Run a food/personal care item drive for our food pantry.
- Get Involved – see how you can help at <http://www.communityplace.org/get-involved>
- Like us on Facebook! www.facebook.com/communityplace
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