

Costa Mesa nonprofit's video series to show impact of addiction on children

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Melissa Suffield is featured in a recently released video by New Directions for Women, a Costa Mesa-based drug and alcohol rehabilitation provider. The video will be part of a series highlighting the struggles of children of addicts. (Courtesy of New Directions for Women)

Melissa Suffield spent her childhood trying to keep her mother alive.

When food was scarce, she wandered door to door appealing to strangers so they wouldn't go hungry.

When her mother locked herself in the bedroom, Suffield charged the door to prevent her from taking drugs.

DAILY PILOT

Her mother was a drug addict so Suffield had to grow up quickly. There was no other option.

“I lived in fear,” Suffield said. “I was always wondering about what she was doing, where she was, what she was going to do, who she was going to be with. I did my best to control that situation.”

Suffield’s story is highlighted in a short video recently released by New Directions for Women, a Costa Mesa-based drug and alcohol rehabilitation provider. The piece will be part of a series highlighting the struggles of children of addicts.

The videos are being released on the organization’s website and social media channels. The next video is expected to be released in January.

The organization is partnering with filmmaker Kevin Hanlon known for directing “Bill W.: The Creative Force Behind Alcoholics Anonymous,” which documents the life of William Wilson.

Tania Bhattacharyya, executive director of New Direction’s foundation, said the short videos, between three to five minutes, will hopefully become part of a larger documentary in the future.

“We need to shine a light on the stories of these children,” Bhattacharyya said. “They are generally forgotten, but they are important to breaking the cycle of addiction.”

New Directions takes an uncommon approach to treating addiction by providing counseling and care to children as well as their mothers. The organization also treats pregnant women, a practice Bhattacharyya said was atypical for treatment centers.

DAILY PILOT

Since 1977 the organization has treated more than 5,000 women, including Suffield's mother.

Suffield, now 27, and her mother came to New Directions in 2002. Suffield was 11 and had already spent much of her childhood trying to keep her mother alive.

She grew up in a home in the desert with her mother. They lived by candlelight.

A brother visited every once in a while, but for the most part the only company the two had was a tandem of abusive boyfriends.

While she was attending elementary school in tattered clothing, Suffield's homelife included holding her mother's hair back while she vomited from too much to drink and avoiding the violent outbursts of abusive men.

"I would wake up and all of a sudden random people are watching me because my mom is gone for a couple of nights," Suffield said, of the times her mother left strangers in charge while she catered to her vices in Las Vegas.

Suffield said her mother was arrested in 2002 for drug-related offenses and a judge told her that she could forgo jail time if she went to New Directions. Suffield and her mother spent about seven months living at New Directions. The experience proved redemptive.

Suffield said her mother has been sober for 17 years since finishing the program. Suffield also went through a learning process at the center, realizing that her mother's addiction was more complicated than she previously thought.

DAILY PILOT

“Initially I hated her for what she did,” Suffield said. “I saw the drug and alcohol use as a willing decision she made constantly.”

But, New Directions redefined Suffield’s perspective of addiction. She learned that her mother was more the slave of a disease than a willing participant.

“They taught me about true addiction,” Suffield said. “I learned what it was like from her perspective.”

Suffield went on to graduate with a law degree from Whittier Law School and is currently working as a law clerk at a firm in Long Beach while awaiting the results of her bar exam. She hopes that telling her story in the video series will help spread the message that healing is possible.

“I got to learn with my mom, grow with her and change with her,” Suffield said. “That’s because of New Directions.”