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NEWS

## Placentia woman who grew up with addicted mom rises up, earns law degree



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Melissa Suffield, 27, holds a photo of herself as a baby with her mom Kim and dad Danny at her home in Placentia on Wednesday, November 14, 2018. (Photo by Kevin Sullivan, Orange County Register/SCNG)



Who gets beaten — yes, beaten — with their own Barbie doll? Pause for a moment to steel yourself for the answer.

It's the same little girl who was grabbed by her throat and thrown against a stone fireplace.

But more on that in a minute.

Right now, it is exactly 6 p.m. Friday, Nov. 16, and 27-year-old Melissa Suffield peers at her computer and prays. In seconds, she and hundreds of other hopeful lawyers will find out if they passed the California bar.

Still, Suffield's journey is different.

As a young girl she was a fan of the Reese Witherspoon movie "Legally Blonde," and Suffield's own mother told her she could never be an attorney. But don't think Suffield went to law school to prove Mom wrong.

Suffield has far more important things on her agenda.

This is the Placentia resident's third trip to the state bar exam site. Let's hope this year is different. Now, everything rides on her success.

Her mother just lost her job. Suffield's student loans are well into the six figures. But most important, Suffield, who works at a Long Beach law firm, wants to move forward with her dream of helping foster and orphan children.

Not only does Suffield plan to adopt, she plans to change the very laws that make it so difficult to adopt local children — laws that create lengthy delays for little ones without a mother or father.

Suffield clicks her mouse. A new tab on the computer appears. It's the California state bar site. She searches for her I.D. Her eyes grow wide.

### **Called a thief**

With long brown hair, gray-green eyes and a strong resemblance to a young Valerie Bertinelli, Suffield is open, articulate and carries herself with the confidence of a young attorney.

But life could have turned out far differently if it hadn't been for two things. One, is a nonprofit called New Directions for Women. The other, however, is old-fashioned grit.

The double-barrel blasts of drug and alcohol addictions can take down multiple generations — or they can turn the softest child into rock.

By the time she went through kindergarten, Suffield was carbon-hard.

Suffield's mother received a small house from her grandfather in the desert of Apple Valley. Without that — and the, um, self-proclaimed "kindness" of a string of boyfriends — it's likely mother and child would have gone homeless.

Dad left early in Suffield's childhood and Mom did drugs if they were around. But mostly Mom swam in a sea of alcohol.

I ask Suffield if she knew her life was different than other kids. Oh, she knew.

By the time she was four, the little girl knew exactly what Mom was talking about when she asked friends for p-o-t.

When Suffield started going to school, kids teased her about her dirty clothes, disheveled hair, having no pocket change.

One day in kindergarten, Suffield had a quarter to buy milk. Her classmates were so used to the little girl with zero money, they accused her of stealing — and the accusation stuck.

In second grade, neon orange and pink scissors were the rage and kids brought their own to school. A family friend gave Suffield a pair. Again, the charge was theft.

When there was no food in the house, Mom sometimes sent her daughter out to beg neighbors for food.

“There was always a bottle of alcohol underneath her pillow,” Suffield recalls. “It was the first thing she woke up to and the last thing she had before going to bed.

“She cared more about the bottle than about me.”

### **Flames in the distance**

When an adult fails at being a parent, it's the child who sometimes becomes the adult. By the time she was seven, Suffield was an expert at washing out the vomit in Mom's hair.

“I would hold her hair back when she threw up,” Suffield remembers. “She would say, ‘Don't ever let me drink again.’ But the next week, she would be drinking again.”

By the time she was 10 years old, Suffield was a year behind in school and Mom faced having the electricity cut off or buying booze. It was no contest.

Soon, there was no working fridge, no stove, no water heater, no lights. Instead, there was an ice chest and candles from the 99 Cents Only Store.

On one hot August day in 2001, Suffield waited for Mom in the living room of a stranger's house. Mom was in the garage doing things her daughter didn't want to know about. She only knew she just wanted to go home.

Day turned to night. Finally, at 1 a.m. Mom showed up. Mother and daughter trudged down a road toward home. Eventually, they saw red and blue lights in the distance.

Firefighters explained it appeared that the cat had knocked over a candle. The house was gone.

Suffield recalls the smell — campfire mixed with burning paper mixed with mildew.

A new boyfriend arrived about the same time as the insurance money. But instead of replacing the house, Mom and daughter moved in with the boyfriend who had a place in Big Bear.

“He spent all the money,” Suffield says quietly. With tattoos from his face to toes, the man was scary. But even more terrifying was his parenting.

“He slammed the car on my foot,” Suffield allows. “My foot didn't shatter. But it did swell.”

He bought her Barbie dolls, she reports, and then hit her with the dolls. He sent her flying into the fireplace. He threw a land phone at her, but she spun around and it hit her in the back.

Things weren't much better at school. In winter the house was so cold, she wore long underwear or pajamas under her clothes. Kids and teachers, she says, "knew my mom was trash, so they treated me like trash."

Then, the world turned. The adolescent found faith in Jesus Christ — and Mom got busted for a drug violation.

### **New Directions rescue**

For most people, getting arrested isn't the best thing that's ever happened. But sometimes it's a godsend.

Mom went to jail and Suffield went to foster care. For the first time in her life, she knew there were no crazed drunks around. She felt safe.

"There were a bunch of other little kids there," Suffield says, smiling at the memories. "There were cereal bowls with straws attached. I thought, 'This is so cool.'

"I never had anything fancy like that."

Soon, mother and daughter were reunited at New Directions for Women, a 30-bed rehab center for women suffering from substance abuse.

At first, Suffield hated New Directions, hated being away from the few friends she had, hated having to go to a fourth school within a year. "I was very angry," she confesses. "I was not a sad little girl. I was a hardened little girl."

But little by little, Suffield shed her battle-worn exterior. She went to counseling. She learned her mother's alcoholism wasn't her fault but a disease. She learned she shouldn't be the adult.

After seven months at the shelter, New Directions for Women helped mother and daughter find an apartment and Mom found a job. Still, the first year was especially tough. "I was scared Mom wasn't going to stay sober."

But it turned out Mom had some of the same grit as her daughter. Today, Mom is 17 years sober.

Suffield went on to earn her bachelor's degree at Cal State Fullerton and then graduated cum laude from Whittier Law School.

What drives her?

“All I know,” Suffield offers, “is that I didn’t want to be like the rest of my family. I want to be successful and success means that I did something with my life, that I didn’t throw it away.”

On Friday night, Suffield turns back to her computer and grimaces.

Once again, she didn’t pass the bar. But she won’t give up, she will pass in the near future. And best of all, she will make a difference.

Out there, there are kids who need her help. But mostly, they need her wisdom.

Article link: <https://www.ocregister.com/2018/11/18/placentia-woman-who-grew-up-with-addicted-mom-rises-up-earns-law-degree/>