

Misty Kelso — Joplin, Missouri

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to tell my story.

My name is Misty. I am a mother, a woman in recovery, the Operations Manager of Washington Family Hope Center, and someone who has experienced poverty and the struggle of rebuilding my life firsthand. I have lived in Joplin, Missouri, my entire life. I am not sharing my story from a place of formal education or expertise. I am sharing it from a place of lived experience.

I grew up in a family that depended on welfare. I experienced homelessness several times. I grew up around addiction and generational poverty. Poverty was normal to me. You learn it. You absorb it. You carry it into adulthood without always realizing how deeply it has shaped you. Poverty is more than the amount of money in a bank account. It can affect the way you think about yourself, what you believe you deserve, and what you believe you are capable of. When you spend your whole life watching the people who are supposed to teach you how to navigate life struggle, it can become difficult to imagine that your own life could look different.

Looking back now, I can see how so many of the things I experienced were connected. Lack of confidence, instability, poor choices, unhealthy relationships, trauma, addiction, and poverty can build upon one another. One struggle can make the next struggle easier to fall into. My childhood and early years of adulthood taught me how to survive, but I did not learn how to build.

I was a smart child. I was a straight-A honor-roll student and had scholarships for speech and debate. I worked hard. But even though I had abilities and potential, the environment I grew up in set me up for failure in many ways. I did not have a strong picture in my mind of what independence looked like. I did not naturally see myself as someone who could confidently support herself, manage money, build a career, or create long-term stability.

By the age of 13, I was drinking and using methamphetamines. I dropped out of high school during my senior year and married my husband at the age of 18. I was still wrapped in addiction and had very little self-esteem. I married a man who was emotionally, physically, and financially abusive to me. We struggled in poverty and lived on government assistance for most of our marriage. We had two sons together.

After 13 years, I made a life-changing decision. I left because of my boys. I did not want them to grow up in the same environment of abuse that I had experienced. I applied for low-income housing, moved my sons, and was ready to start a new life. I had been clean from meth for a few years. I found an assistant manager job at a gas station and started trying to rebuild our life.

But I learned very quickly that getting out of an abusive relationship and getting clean did not mean I automatically knew how to build a stable life. I lacked life skills, and I lacked community. I had been isolated for so long that I did not have a support system to help me with my boys. I never seemed to make enough money to care for them. I felt stuck in the gap where I made too much money to qualify for certain kinds of assistance, but not enough money to survive.

I had to leave work to pick my children up from school. If I could not find a babysitter, I would take them to work with me. Then my rent was raised, and I could not afford childcare. At the same time, I was struggling with the effects of years of unhealed trauma from abuse. I was depressed, overwhelmed, and could not see a way to make everything work.

The people I had met in low-income housing were not the kind of community I needed during a time of desperation and irrational thinking. Many of the families around me were struggling with the same cycle I was trying to escape. Some were using resources meant for their basic needs to support destructive habits, while others were simply trying to survive from one crisis to the next.

After months of trying to better my life, working crazy hours, struggling to make ends meet, and feeling like I was getting nowhere, the struggle of being in that gap became overwhelming. I quit my full-time job and started relying fully on government assistance. With the free time I had, I began hanging around the wrong people in my apartment complex, and I relapsed.

My addiction was connected to trauma, environment, relationships, and my own decisions. I take responsibility for the decisions I made, but I also understand today that addiction does not happen in a vacuum. Assistance by itself did not interrupt the destructive cycle either. It helped maintain housing and meet immediate needs, but it could not create recovery. It could not create responsibility. It could not create healthy relationships. It could not create purpose.

Within a couple of months, DFS had been called, and I signed temporary guardianship of my children to my dad. After my children were no longer with me, I used my housing as a place to live while I partied and got high. After months of violations, I was finally asked to vacate the premises.

During this time, I found out I was pregnant with my third child. I went to a pregnancy clinic in Joplin and got a pregnancy test. They helped me tremendously with pregnancy care and with navigating homelessness while pregnant. I wish I could say that my addiction ended at that point, but it did not.

At nine months pregnant, my dad allowed me to come stay with him. I was still using after I had the baby, and on October 15, 2020, DFS came and removed my children from my dad's home. My dad also asked me to leave.

I became homeless for 14 months.

During those 14 months, I acquired more trauma, lost more of my self-esteem, and developed a hopelessness that felt impossible to come back from. I relied on other people to feed me. I slept in alleys, tents, and parking lots of run-down gas stations. I had no dignity left. It is difficult to fully put into words what being that low in life does to the way someone views themselves.

The longer I was homeless, the more drugs I used. I experienced psychosis. There were times when I could not even keep track of what day it was. I was not doing the things I needed to do to get my children back from the state. I honestly believed that I could never do any better than I

was doing. I thought it was better for my children to stay away from me. My family had completely disowned me. I was what many people would have referred to as a lost cause.

But eventually, the heartache of missing my children became greater than my fear of failure.

At 5:30 in the morning on December 12, 2021, I made a decision. I was sick of living that way. I wanted something different. I walked to the steps of a ministry called Watered Gardens.

I had been served breakfast there many times throughout my homelessness. I waited until check-in that morning and was met by a woman named Jocelyn Brisson. Jocelyn had encouraged me for months to check into the shelter. She had a story similar to mine. She had spent much of her life homeless and addicted to drugs, and I was drawn to the way she welcomed me every time I walked through those doors.

That morning, I finally said yes.

Jocelyn helped me get settled. I had no belongings, so the next day I got to shop at the Worth Shop for the necessities I needed. Jocelyn let me sleep for a few days. She loved me when I was still hurting, angry, broken, and absolutely terrified that I was going to fail again.

But something different was happening at Watered Gardens. I was not just being given a place to stay. I was being welcomed into a family.

The Watered Gardens family became the community I had been missing for most of my life. Staff members encouraged me, prayed for me, challenged me, and held me accountable. They did not define me by my past, but they also did not pretend my past did not matter. They gave me grace, but they also expected something from me.

That was important.

For the first time, I experienced what it felt like for people to love me enough to tell me the truth and believe in me enough to expect more from me. The staff helped me make a plan for what I needed to do next. I needed treatment. I needed meetings. I needed to contact caseworkers. I needed psychological evaluations. I had a long list of things I needed to accomplish.

Then I started treatment.

At treatment, I learned about the healing I needed to do to get past the addiction I had struggled with for so many years. I had childhood trauma, sexual trauma, and physical and emotional abuse from my childhood and from my marriage. I had to learn how to heal.

But I also had to learn how to live.

I had to learn simple things like scheduling and budgeting. I had to learn how to have a bank account, write checks, file taxes, pay bills, and manage money. There were so many things I did

not realize that I did not know about being a successful adult. And Watered Gardens did not just tell me how to do those things. They gave me opportunities to practice them.

At Watered Gardens, everybody works for their bed as long as they are able. So I worked there every day washing clothes for the center. At first, it was just laundry. But something happened to me in that laundry room. I began to find purpose in something so simple.

I started taking pride in folding every article of clothing that came through the laundry room. I began to understand that the work I was doing mattered. I was contributing. I was not just receiving help anymore. I was becoming part of something.

Work gave me structure, but it gave me much more than that. It taught me responsibility. It taught me that I could show up. It taught me that I could finish something. It taught me that I could be counted on. It taught me that I could do something well and take pride in it.

For most of my life, I had viewed work as something you did simply to survive. Watered Gardens helped me understand that work can also be part of healing. Work can build confidence. Work can create purpose. Work can teach discipline. Work can restore dignity.

When you have spent years believing you are worthless, there is something powerful about getting up every morning, showing up, doing a job, and knowing that what you did mattered to someone else.

Watered Gardens did not just give me things I needed. They taught me how to become someone who could contribute.

Between laundry, treatment, meetings, and doing the things I needed to do for DFS, my life suddenly became busy. I spent much of my spare time at the treatment center, cleaning the facility and attending classes. Eventually, I got a full-time job.

I was juggling treatment, work, DFS requirements, meetings, and everything else I needed to accomplish. Suddenly, scheduling became extremely important. When I started getting paid, I began learning how to budget my money. I had never really had access to my paychecks before, so I had no idea how to pay bills or manage money. I began learning.

I lived at Watered Gardens for five months. During those five months, I learned so many things I had lacked in my life. But perhaps the biggest thing I learned was how to see myself differently.

Before I came to Watered Gardens, I truly believed I was worthless. Through relationships, hard work, accountability, and community, I began to understand that my life could have purpose and value. I learned that I could do hard things even when the odds were stacked against me. I learned that I was not incapable.

I was just never taught.

I moved into my own apartment. I continued fighting to get my children back. I bought my first car. I was building a life.

Then, on August 23, 2022, DFS terminated my parental rights to my children.

That was one of the hardest days of my life.

But I was different than I had been before. I was not alone. I had a recovery community around me that held me up during the toughest season of my life. Jocelyn went to every DFS meeting with me and encouraged me along the way. The treatment program I attended had helped me create relapse-prevention plans for days exactly like that one.

By the grace of God, I made it through one of the hardest seasons of my life. I realized that I was building a life that I did not want to throw away anymore. I had something to lose. I had purpose. I had people who believed in me. I had work. I had dignity. And I had a family.

Not the family I had grown up with, but a family that had chosen to walk beside me while I learned how to become the woman I was created to be.

In August of 2023, I applied for a job at Watered Gardens. I became the weekend supervisor for the Outreach Center, the evening supervisor for Washington Family Hope Center, and a live-in resident at Washington Family Hope Center. I was honored to start giving back what had been so freely given to me.

Watered Gardens had given me dignity, and I wanted to share that same dignity with women who were just like me.

Eventually, I was offered the position of Operations Manager. That was one of the most humbling moments of my life. The place where I had once walked in homeless, addicted, broken, and terrified was now the place where I was working to help other people rebuild their lives.

I had gone from needing someone to believe in me to becoming someone who could believe in someone else.

DFS eventually began allowing me to see my oldest son. I moved into God's Resort so I could have my son with me while taking the Operations Manager position.

My life had changed.

Not because someone simply gave me a better life. My life changed because people walked with me while I learned how to build one.

Working for Watered Gardens over these last several years has completely changed my perspective on poverty, work, dignity, and recovery. In my daily life at Watered Gardens, I get to walk alongside women who are hurting, who have experienced trauma and abuse, and who

struggle with addiction. I get to help make a pathway for them to become healed and successful members of society who believe in themselves.

And because I have lived it, I understand something that I did not understand before.

You cannot simply give someone everything they need and expect their life to change.

Sometimes you have to help someone get out of survival mode before they can begin healing. You have to build relationships. You have to create community. You have to teach skills. You have to provide opportunities to work and contribute. You have to hold people accountable while still giving them grace. And you have to help people discover that they have value.

I have learned that we can stunt people's growth when we do not hold them accountable for the things they need to do. I have learned that people need someone who will walk beside them, but they also need opportunities to take responsibility for their own lives.

I have learned that work is about more than a paycheck.

Work can restore dignity. Work can teach responsibility. Work can build confidence. Work can give someone purpose.

I have learned that someone who has spent their entire life surviving may need to be taught how to build.

And I know this because I was that person.

Watered Gardens gave me more than shelter. They gave me a family. They gave me accountability. They gave me opportunities to work. They gave me purpose. They gave me dignity. They gave me people who believed in me when I could not believe in myself. Most importantly, they gave me a pathway to become the person I am today.

My life looks completely different now.

I became a different person through healing, growth, community, work, accountability, and dignity.

I went from a little girl who learned to survive poverty, to a teenager trapped in addiction, to a young woman trapped in an abusive marriage, to a mother who lost her children, to a homeless and addicted woman who believed she was a lost cause.

And now I am a woman in recovery, a mother, a leader, a worker, and someone who has the privilege of helping other women rebuild their lives.

My story is not a story about someone who was simply rescued from poverty.

It is a story about someone who was given the relationships, opportunities, accountability, skills, and dignity necessary to learn how to build a life.

I know what it feels like to have nothing.

I know what it feels like to believe you are nothing.

And I also know what it feels like to discover that you are worth something.

I am forever grateful for the Watered Gardens family that helped me discover that.

Thank you for allowing me to share my story.