

*So my mom was totally straight, my brother was an addicted criminal, and I was right in the middle...*

I grew up in Surrey, British Columbia during the 1980's & 1990's. I had a good childhood, raised by my single mom, along with one older brother, Greg. My mom worked two jobs when I was young and earned her career with the Ministry of Social Services by the time I was in my pre-teens. Our lives were modest, comfortable, stable and I was happy overall.

By the age of 5, I was getting weekly riding lessons on a pony named Pickles and I was totally horse crazy! This led to competitive English riding, jumping, showing and a lifelong passion to be near these amazing animals. I got excellent grades at school and spent the rest of my time in a barn.

By the age of 11, I started visiting my brother in jail – he was 17. Usually it was break & entry, stealing cars, possession of stolen property, possession of narcotics, etc. that got him arrested. There was no evil in his actions or nature but he seemed to be lacking empathy and, therefore, respect for himself, for others, and for consequences. He LOVED me & mom though and we loved him back, undyingly. So when he went to jail, we went to visit him. This continued for the next 20 years.

When I was young, I would often come home from school to a living room full of marijuana smoke and teenage boys who aspired only to chase a buzz and easy money. I would run to my bedroom and put blankets under the door to block out the smell and the influence. At 16, I started dating one of my brother's friends. Greg was horrified, I assumed I would 'change' this person for the better, (that didn't go very well) and 8 years later, I was fighting him in court to win custody of our 2 year old son.

During this time, I was surrounded by people on a one way cycle of addiction, crime, rehab, repeat. Thankfully, my mom had *always* raised us with an upstanding influence of working hard for a living, of earning all that you have, and of zero use of drugs or alcohol. So my mom was totally straight, my brother was an addicted criminal, and I was right in the middle.

I know how an addict feels when he gets a fix and I've avoided succumbing to such dead end outcomes even as my 'pack' took that direction. I've experienced both walks of life with a drive to be good and an acceptance of the bad. It's an extremely unique position when you can relate to and have trust with both sides.

I lived in a deviant environment without fully engaging in the lifestyle; instead, I observed, I partook, I empathized, I supported, I tried to help and also to understand. What I saw what that nothing worked. Not incarceration, rehab programs, supportive environments, loving family,

good examples, harsh consequences... I've seen people laugh at their 'programs' while they prepare their next fix. I've seen them want to do better, try to break the cycle and fall back because experiencing success is so foreign to them that they cannot function there.

We lost my brother in 2005. No matter how much we loved him, no matter how we tried, we could not save him from his own choices. Now I'm in a position to help. Partnering my connection with horses to helping youth get their lives on track fulfills the purpose of MY life. I now offer an amazing alternative for youth to learn vital life skills that change their dead end directions! I've found the key to influencing young lives before they take that hard path! I am so extremely happy to bring this life changing learning to everyone that I possibly can. I do it with the full support of my family (including and especially my mom), in the memory of my brother, Greg and with the best intent for the future of our Youth.

~ Shana Nicholls