

Catholic Charities, drug court aid woman in fight to overcome addiction

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DUBUQUE — Years of struggling with addiction to methamphetamines and other substances had led Rachel Montes to the point of giving up. After being released from a four-day stint in jail in March 2015, she began a night of drinking. In a fit of frustration and sadness, she intentionally ran her car off a road, hoping to take her own life.

“I really didn’t want to be this person who all she had to offer was to ... spend the rest of my life in prison,” Montes reflected. “I just couldn’t figure out how to figure out life, period.”

The collision caused broken ribs, multiple fractures to her spine and neck, and other injuries. After the vehicle landed, she only remembers bits and pieces of what happened next. It was about 12 hours before help arrived.

“What I remember was spiritual,” she recalled. “I was lying in a field. I was in my best friend’s lap, but he had committed suicide when we were 18, so this was eight or nine years later. There were those types of memories. I remember coming off the helicopter, but I don’t remember before and I don’t remember the accident.”

Montes says she died and emergency medical personnel brought her back to life at least once in transit to Gunderson Lutheran Medical Center in La Crosse, Wisconsin. She later regained consciousness and had emergency surgery. For the next several months she recovered at the hospital, having to learn how to walk again. As she began the long road to physical healing, she began to re-evaluate her psychological and spiritual condition. She resolved then to make a serious change.

Montes has traveled a long and difficult road to overcome addiction, with the latest milestone being reached Feb. 14. Thanks to the love and support of a large group of people, including her family; her partner, Jeffrey Harbaugh; the staff of the Dubuque/Delaware County Drug Court; and her Circle of Support and Accountability, which she became part of through Catholic Charities Jail & Prison Ministry, Montes recently graduated from an intensive program that can take up to 19 months to complete. The court offers people facing criminal charges related to drug addiction an alternative to prison. A ceremony to mark Montes' completion of the program was held in a Dubuque County courtroom. Montes gave a speech reflecting on her journey as she marked 577 days of sobriety. She shed tears as she thanked her supporters, who gave her a standing ovation.

"I'm proud of who I am today, and that's not going to change anytime soon," she said.

As part of the ceremony, key figures in her life were able to give public witness to her growth and achievement. Karen Zeckser, a parishioner at St. Joseph the Worker in Dubuque, who served as Montes' mentor and circle member, was among the speakers.

"This is not a small miracle," Zeckser told the crowd at the graduation. "This is a big miracle."

Montes acknowledged that, although the injuries she suffered in 2015 have caused her great pain, her brush with death turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

"This path for me was a direction from God," she said. "It was a divine path. I think that I did die, was brought back on a flight. That right there was a clean start. I really think that if I had not gone through the accident I would not have been ever able to complete drug court. I probably never would have slowed down enough to realize that there's more to life."

Montes, a Manchester native, grew up in unstable circumstances. Both her parents had their own issues with drugs. By age 11, she started getting into trouble. Her father, Charles Montes, was sent to prison, and her mother, Laura Hawthorn, was also struggling. She began experimenting with marijuana at a young age and then took harder drugs by age 13. She spent time in several juvenile detention facilities.

"All that did was make me angry," she recalled. "I really thought all authority was trying to take me away from my family."

Her problems with drugs and criminal activity continued off and on. For a period of several years, she was able to stop using meth and had her son, but the end of the relationship with her son's father and subsequent custody battle led, in part, to her decision to begin using drugs again. The cycle continued until the night of the car wreck. During her time in the hospital, some of her family members, including both her parents, came to see her. Despite having issues in the past, the daughter and her parents had been attempting to improve their relationships.

"My mom had straightened up in the latter part of my life, and she became somebody you could really depend on," said Montes.

After being released from the hospital, Montes spent the better part of two years recovering, mostly at the home of her mother. In May 2015, she met Harbaugh, a friend of her father's, and there was an instant connection. Harbaugh helped Montes' mother care for her, and over time, the two became close.

A painful bacterial infection in Montes' back slowed down the healing of one of her incisions. Meanwhile, she was still dealing with criminal charges. She faced a 15-year sentence for drug manufacturing charges and other offenses. In 2017, prosecutors offered her entrance into the drug court program. She accepted a plea deal.

The first part of the program required Montes to attend a 28-day in-patient rehabilitation program in Waterloo. Still clinging to some old habits, she got there three days late due to her decision to use drugs. She felt anxiety about being away from her family. She also had other fears.

"I had never really been afraid to go do prison time," she said. "It's not scary. I've learned to adapt to those environments. What's scary is that I may never learn to figure out life. I wanted to learn how to live up to these expectations of normal people."

In the end, she took the chance on rehab, despite one previous unsuccessful attempt.

"I thought about leaving," she said. "After two weeks, I said, 'OK, I'm going to do this.' I started taking suggestions."

Harbaugh, who himself has never taken drugs or alcohol, offered a key pillar of support, driving several hours from his residence in Osterdock to see Montes as often as he could.

"The only way I did cope was I was able to drive down every other day to see her," he said. "I was halfway comforted because I knew she couldn't use drugs while she was in there."



Rachel Montes (right) and her partner Jeffrey Harbaugh. (Photo by Dan Russo/The Witness)

After the rehab period, Montes moved to a halfway house in Dubuque. The drug court required her to get a job, submit to regular drug testing, meet with a professional counselor and a parole officer, and attend several Narcotics Anonymous meetings a week. At times, if she failed to attend meetings or meet other benchmarks, a judge could “sanction” her and other participants with days in jail or community service hours. Montes found a job as a dishwasher and then cook.

While at the halfway facility, Montes heard about the Jail & Prison Ministry’s Circles of Support and Accountability from another resident. A group of volunteers from the community meets with a drug court participant regularly to offer support and help them build responsible habits. A mentor from this group, in her case Zeckser, meets with the person one-on-one. Montes asked Deacon Bill Hickson, director of the Jail & Prison Ministry, to enroll her.

“I would only agree to fill out the paper if Deacon Bill would find me a circle that wasn’t going to try to convert me,” she said. “I do believe in Jesus Christ. I’m just not one for religion. I wanted to make friends, but I had no idea how to do it because the only thing I seem to attract is like-minded people, and I was trying to change that.”

After leaving the halfway house, she found an apartment. Over the course of 19 months she faced many challenges, including her mother dying unexpectedly from a blood clot in May 2018 and her grandfather dying in February.

"I lost my mom," she said. "I lost my grandpa. That in itself was too much to deal with and then a couple different changes in jobs. (The circle) would kind of always calm my spirit when it came to certain things. I don't know if they ever know how much that helped me. ... They always said that I helped them understand things."

Harbaugh credits the love she received from the circle and many others for the success.

"Remember the term unconditional love," he said. "Love is most powerful. I think it goes a lot further when whoever it may be understands you are truly there for them and they need you, no matter the circumstance."

Now that Montes is through the program, she plans to return to Manchester. Montes is committed to maintaining her sobriety and says she has learned a lot.

"I learned love," she said. "I learned compassion and empathy. I learned the bond between human beings, the spiritual bond, especially through the circle. Just the fact that people genuinely care for other people, whereas before I felt like I was getting down to (questioning) how many people really care in this world."

Cover photo: Department of Corrections Parole Officer Lauri Waldbillig (left) poses with Rachel Montes. On Feb. 14, Montes graduated from the drug court program, which offers people struggling with addiction who are facing criminal charges a chance for intensive treatment as an alternative to prison. (Photo by Dan Russo/The Witness)