

'Make small goals that lead to big goals'

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abuse at the hands of Nichelle's ex-husband, stints of incarceration and estrangement from their children.

In 2011, Nichelle, 50, was sentenced to serve 19 months in Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in Wilsonville.

"They gave me the best punishment they could have locking me up with 500 women," Nichelle says. "I told them I was never going back there and I haven't. If things were the way they are now, I don't think I would have become a drug addict."

Courtney, 27, never went to prison, but was in jail several times for offenses such as drug possession and failure to appear. As a child, she swore that she would never do hard drugs.

"I saw what they did to my mom and I hated it," Courtney says. "I knew once I did it that I probably wouldn't be able to stop, but I made a stupid decision and chose to use meth with my ex. It became a thing where we partied on the weekends while the kids were gone. He stopped. I didn't."

The Permans met with *Smoke Signals* and in an often emotional interview shared their experiences in the hope of encouraging others who are incarcerated or struggling with drug use.

According to the Drug Policy Institute, children with a parent in prison are several times more likely than others to end up in the foster care system, drop out of school and go to prison themselves.

Nichelle's story

Nichelle's Tribal heritage comes from her father, Jeffrey Brooks, but she grew up estranged from him and was raised by her mother and stepfather. The family moved frequently due to his job as a cable installer, so every year Nichelle attended a new school from the age of 10 to 14.

"I hated it," she says. "When I was 14, I told my parents I was done. I was tired of being somewhere different every year."

They bought a house in Portland and Nichelle graduated from Madison High School in 1990. She married soon after and her oldest daughter was born in 1991.

During the next several years, Nichelle built a successful construction equipment rental business, but lost it due to meth use and a subsequent divorce.

"Three months after we opened the business, I decided to get divorced. I lost my business and went through a really nasty and expensive divorce," she says.

After Perman's divorce in 1999, she moved into a Molalla duplex with her two young daughters, got a job at a grocery store and later worked as a school bus driver and in retail. During this time, she also bought a home, but only lived there for two years before selling it.

She and her children moved frequently until 2007, when Nichelle became homeless and couch surfed with friends and family members,



Photo by Kamiah Koch

Tribal member Nichelle Perman wipes away tears in her Portland apartment on Thursday, May 19, while listening to her daughter, Tribal member Courtney Perman, talk about losing custody of her 8-year-old daughter because of her drug addiction.



even living in the same home as her ex-husband for a while. During this time, she continued using meth and her life was marred by violence and uncertainty. She also had periods of sobriety after both outpatient and inpatient drug treatment.

The first time Nichelle was arrested and convicted of burglary was in 2008 when she was driving the vehicle used to store items that her male companion had stolen from garages. She served 30 days in jail and was sentenced to 36 months of probation.

After that incident, Nichelle began hanging out with a different man and was arrested in Tillamook County in 2010 for first-degree burglary, theft and unauthorized use of a motor vehicle. She was convicted on the burglary charge and sentenced to 19 months in Coffee Creek Correctional Facility in January 2011.

"It comes down to my hanging out with the wrong people," Nichelle says. "I was also in my 14th year of a drug addiction to meth."

Women in state prisons are far more likely than their male counterparts to be incarcerated for a drug or property crime offense: Twenty-six percent have been con-

victed of a drug offense compared to 13 percent of men. Property crimes, which are often interwoven with drug addiction, are 24 percent for women compared with 16 percent for men, according to The Sentencing Project.

Since it was Nichelle's second property crime offense, she didn't get any time suspended from her sentence for good behavior.

During her time in prison, Nichelle worked to pay off court fines and traffic tickets. She also contacted the Tribe and found out about the 477 program, which helps Tribal members find and maintain employment through assistance with training, tools, transportation, clothing, and job-related licensing and fees.

She maintained a close relationship with her youngest daughter, who was 17 at the time, and was able to provide money to support her. Her eldest daughter, then 20, didn't visit and the two still have a strained relationship.

"Going to prison put strain on my family as it would any family," Nichelle says. "We were already strained long before I went to prison though. ... My kids and I are survivors and I'm sure things would be different today. I don't know how, but I know they would be different if I didn't go to prison and if we weren't homeless."

After being released from Coffee Creek, Nichelle had a job lined up within one week of getting out as a restaurant cook. During that time, she lived in transitional housing for women who had recently been incarcerated.

"If you don't have a place set up or arrangements made then you don't get out until you do," she says. "I didn't have any family to move in with or a place to go. ... I slept in a room with I believe it was four or six girls."

Nichelle continued to struggle with homelessness and substance use after being released, but has been sober since 2020, has a full-

time job at an Amazon warehouse and a Portland apartment of her own.

Her advice to other Tribal mothers who are in prison and struggling with addiction is set small goals that, over time, result in big changes.

"My advice is to stay away from the drugs and if you're a smoker don't start smoking again," Nichelle says. "Stick with the transitional housing. Work on yourself. Go to NA/AA meetings. Get in an outpatient drug program if drugs are an issue. Never give up! Make small goals that lead to big goals. It's not going to be easy but if you give up your relationships won't get better and you'll end up back at that horrible place, which will only make things worse."

Courtney's story

Courtney doesn't recall much of the early years when her parents were together, but some incidents stand out.

"There were good times, but I mostly remember the bad things," she says. "I remember when my dad built me a giant swing set, but I also remember when my dad destroyed my mom's new car."

The family moved frequently after Nichelle's 1999 divorce, living in Molalla, Lake Oswego, Oregon City and Canby. They were often homeless or stayed with friends.

Despite all of the struggles, Nichelle kept her children in the same school district all through elementary and middle school, even when it meant long daily commutes. She recalls changing schools frequently as a youth and hated it, so she wanted her daughters to have a more stable experience.

"My mom wasn't home a whole lot, so I just did whatever I wanted," Courtney says. "I started smoking weed, partying and drinking when I was 13. Then, I went to live with

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