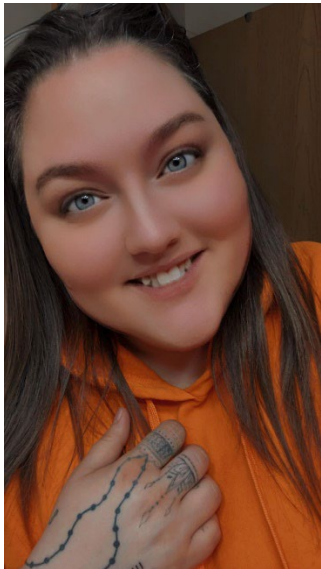


## A Word From The Creator



First and foremost, I want to thank each and every individual that took time out of their lives to contribute to this Anti-stigma campaign in its entirety. Your contributions have been inspiring to me personally and will be inspiring to others in our community whether you see it or not. You are valuable, you are worthy, and your story matters! To those who were willing to be vulnerable and share their stories, you are admirable. It takes a lot to be vulnerable, so I cannot tell you how brave you all are. I am so moved by your stories, and I cannot wait to watch you all as your stories continue to develop.

I want to take a second and mention how largely this anti-stigma campaign has changed my life and my view. Walking into this internship with the St. Francis Way Clinic in Litchfield IL, I had no idea what to expect, but I did know I wanted to make a positive difference in the recovery field. When my supervisor posed me with the idea of doing an anti-stigma campaign, I had no idea what that meant. I didn't even know what stigma was, let alone how to run an anti-stigma campaign. How was an individual like me, who was merely almost 4 years in recovery supposed to do something this big? I already felt defeated because I felt so small. Looking back I realize that I was feeling small because I was never given the opportunity to take up space. All of this changed one morning when I came into work, and someone left a sticker on my desk that had 3 simple words; "Take Up Space". I realized that I was continuing to stigmatize myself because of the stigmatizing conditioning that I experienced all through my life. I needed to break down this barrier that I was continuing to create in my own life, even though I was out of my cycle of addiction. Since then, the confidence within myself has grown immensely. I have learned such a large amount of information on stigma, and it has changed a lot of the ways that I view things so that I am able to better meet people where they are at in their personal journeys in life.

Personally, the stigmatizing word that affected me negatively was, burden. I was taught from an early age by the way I was treated, that I was a problem, or a burden for taking up space or being authentically myself. I was treated as though I was too much for having opinions and going against the grain, which eventually left me feeling broken and low. Growing up both of my parents lived with mental health and substance use disorders and did not have access to proper assistance or education on how they could get help. In my case, this caused a lot of childhood abuse; both mental and physical. Unfortunately, this abuse instilled fear in me. My father would tell me that the people

who were supposed to help, such as police and medical providers, weren't safe to tell things to because they would come after my dad if they knew what he was doing. Me being a child, I did not want my father to get into trouble, so I learned that being quiet was safer than saying something and risking him getting into trouble, which typically led to more abuse from my father directed towards me. This "childhood training," as well as experiencing stigma because of who my father was, and regarding my mental health disorders, led me to not receive help sooner. As I got older, and watched my children get older with me, I realized how important it was to get help for my mental health and substance use disorders. My turning point was on the floor of my brother's dining room the morning after relapsing on Percocet. Regardless of my relapse, I woke up with my 5-year-old daughter laying down next to me sleeping soundly. My son had apparently put a pillow below my head and a blanket across me and my daughter chose to lay down and sleep on the floor next to me. It was my children's unconditional love that made me realize that I deserved better, and that I needed to do better for us as a family unit. It was in this situation that I began to understand that I wasn't needy, or burdensome, I was simply human. The positive adjective that would describe me now and even back when I was struggling through my hardest times, was human. I was living life and learning. I was growing and developing. I was making mistakes, no matter how hard they were, and I was simply being human. The human experience is what we make it. It is how we view it, and ourselves in light of it. We can be so self-critical because of personal experiences with other people and situations in our pasts, but it is all a part of the HUMAN EXPERIENCE. Being gentler with ourselves through all of this is essential to moving through things into a healthier, and happier lifestyle. If I can give anyone advice on stigma it would be, learn yourself. Take time to learn what you stand for, what you don't stand for, your boundaries, your interests, all of it. I live by the phrase, "If you don't stand for something, you will fall for anything," and when it comes to stigma don't allow yourself or anyone else to make you feel unworthy in any way of the best things in life, let alone basic human needs.

**Educating yourself on stigma is life changing.  
Be the change. Help end this hate.**

Much love,

*Michelle L Dettwiler*

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