



# Breaking Chains and Building Bonds:

## A Father's Journey to Overcome Addiction, His Daughter's Coping Struggles, and How a Local Assessment Center Facilitated Healing

### JASON AND EMMA

Jason's father passed away when he was only a year old. Raised by a single mom, he recalls being surrounded by alcoholism and witnessing his mother abused by men.

At age 18, Jason began struggling with alcoholism himself and started a continuous cycle of treatment and relapse.

When Jason was 30, he met the mother of his children, Chelsea, and they had a daughter, Emma. Jason was living in a halfway house when Emma was born. During the first year of her life, Jason's grandmother passed away, which is when Jason began using methamphetamine. Chelsea struggled with substance addiction as well.

At only one year old, Emma was placed in the foster care system. When she was two, Chelsea got clean and regained custody of her daughter. Over the years, there would be a back and forth of custody between the parents, even after they split up. One would get clean and regain custody while the other would relapse. If both parents were unable to take care of Emma, she would enter into foster care, which happened four times.

After Emma was born, Jason fathered another child. At a young age, the baby boy developed brain cancer. Jason was still struggling

badly with alcohol, substance addiction, and homelessness. Just before he was scheduled to enter treatment, he attempted suicide. In his words, he had just given up. He was on his twelfth day of treatment when he got word that his son had died. Jason was devastated.

"That's when I went on a mission," Jason says. "Instead of relapsing, I realized that I had been neglecting my other child. I had already lost one kid; I wasn't going to lose another." From there, Jason started a long journey to regain custody of his daughter.

While Emma transitioned to the new "normalcy" of life with her dad, things started off well, but it didn't last long. As the pandemic moved kids to online learning, Emma began to miss school. Truancy coupled with other behavior concerns, such as school fights, continued as classes moved back to in-person. Within the same year, Emma was suspended from school for "misconduct" and started running away from home.

**"I didn't know what else to do, Jasons says. "I was falling apart. It was destroying me mentally."**

### THE JUVENILE ASSESSMENT CENTER

With the help of the dean, they scheduled an appointment with Stephanie Marnocha, a licensed clinical social worker and behavioral health clinician at the Juvenile Assessment Center (JAC) in

Colorado's 18th Judicial District, located in Centennial, Colorado.

**"Referrals come from a variety of entities," Stephanie explains, "schools, courts, the Department of Human Services. Sometimes families reach out on their own."**

In March, Jason and Emma went to see Stephanie together. For the biopsychosocial assessment, Stephanie first met individually with Jason in order to get a better understanding of his concerns for Emma. Then, Stephanie met individually with Emma to get her perspective. Stephanie asked questions about school, family/home life, friends, mental health, and substance use to name a few.

"A big part of what I look for in an assessment is by asking families what they want," Stephanie says, "or what they're hoping to get out of an assessment, because there has to be a level of investment on their part in order to be willing to engage in services. Our goal is not a cookie-cutter approach, to give families a list of 10 different places to call and just say good luck. Our goal is to narrow down resources that they can take into consideration and help them make those connections."

In this case, Jason identified that he needed help in navigating his daughter's behavior and building a stronger relationship with her.

"It was really awesome when they showed up," Stephanie says. "The father, [Jason], said that he'd been looking forward to the appointment for weeks. He was at a loss for what to do. I could tell that he was extremely invested in his daughter and they had been through a lot as a family. I had a really great conversation with both of them."

After the assessment, Stephanie identified a program that she thought would be helpful for the family. It was an eight-week course called "Breaking Chains, Building Bonds." Luckily, a new session was just about to start. Many of the participants were formerly incarcerated adults who'd had little to no contact with their children before the class. In the program, both the parent and youth attend at the same time, and the purpose is to build a relationship with one another through various class activities.

In the end, Jason believes that the Breaking Chains, Building Bonds class is what saved his and Emma's lives, as well as their relationship with each other. Emma had turned 13 years old before starting the class, and after just a few months of working with the program, Jason says that she did a full turnaround—"a complete 180," as he puts it.

**"She went from skipping class nearly every day to not skipping school once since she started the program," Jason says. "Breaking Chains, Building Bonds brought our bond back together. We were so excited to go every week."**

## **THE RESULTS**

Jason says his relationship with Emma is the best it has ever been. Also, the phone calls from

the dean of students stopped too, and Emma was able to finish out the school year on a high note. "For the first time, we had people around us who actually cared about our future. In the group, we were surrounded by people who were going through the same thing that we were going through, people who were struggling, people who were trying to find the light and be a family. A lot of those people were unable to escape that pain. I'm just so thankful that my daughter and I were able to get out of that."

Since starting the program, Jason says that Emma has gained the strength and confidence to want to do better for herself. The father and daughter were so satisfied with the program since graduating that they've already expressed interest in attending the next class session as alumni members to share their story, so that it might help other families going through similar situations.

**"It brought us closer as a family. We were so far apart, and it brought us close together for the first time in both of our lives."**



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