L. Leah Phoenix was nominated as a Reunification Hero by her husband who watched her inspiring journey to Reunification with her daughter, Sunshine. After losing her youngest daughter to SIDS in 2010, L. Leah relapsed and her daughter was put into foster care for 9 months. Despite the obstacles in her way, she was able to beat her addiction and regain custody of Sunshine in just 15 months’ time.

Today, she serves as a Parent Partner Advocate at Good Samaritan Shelter, the facility she previously recovered in. Coming full circle and using her personal story of strength to inspire and give hope to others makes L. Leah Phoenix a true Reunification Hero.

L. Leah’s story is one of hope, and one that reminds us that reunification is possible despite the obstacles in the way. She was brought to tears in our interview because of her deep passion to help others struggling with addiction, and it was an honor to talk with such an amazing woman.

Read the interview below for a first-hand look into L. Leah’s journey to reunification with Sunshine and her life today.

**What are some of your favorite things to do with your kids?**

I am a proud mom of four living kids: a 2 year old, an 8 year old, an eleven year old, and a 17 year old. Despite their varying ages, they all love to hang out with me. I have a physical illness that inhibits me from moving around quickly, but my kids find ways to include me and we have a lot of fun together regardless of what we are doing. Reading is something we all enjoy together, and my two youngest daughters are really excited to see Finding Dory in theaters when it comes out in a few weeks!

**How long was your child out of your care?**

My 8 year old daughter was out of my care for nine months. The case lasted a total of 15 months, and was a very traumatic experience for my daughter and myself since she was only 3 years old at the time.
What was one of the most memorable things about getting your daughter back?

Within a year of losing my youngest daughter to SIDS, I relapsed and my other daughter was taken out of my care. Despite the intense pain and hurt of everything going on, I knew that I couldn’t possibly lose two of my children in one year. My children were, and still are everything to me. I didn’t graduate from a fancy college, or have a job that meant a lot to me. Regaining custody of my daughter was the biggest accomplishment of my life, and one of the most fulfilling moments I’ve ever experienced.

When my daughter was put into foster care, I had very little self-worth and self-esteem. More importantly, I broke my daughter’s heart. Getting her back and knowing that I was once again starting to become someone she could count on was the beginning of a whole new life.

Can you talk about some of the obstacles you faced in getting your daughter back and how that has affected you?

When my daughter was taken out of my care she was placed out of the city. With no money, no job, no car, and very little support, visiting her was always a challenge. I was in a very dark place. I remember one night during in-patient care when I found myself watching the show, “Intervention.” I sat mesmerized watching the woman on the show using drugs until she was out of her mind. I knew in my heart that it was so gross, but all I could think about was how good it would feel to numb out again. That night I cried myself to sleep, but I managed to muster the strength to keep fighting and focus on getting my daughter back. In that moment I knew that the decision I made would have irreversible implications that I could not accept.

What was the worst part about getting separated?

Every week I was only allowed two visits with Sunshine that lasted two hours each. I remember wearing this sweatshirt all the time that Sunshine would grab when it was time to go, tears streaming down her face as she begged me not to leave. It took every ounce of strength in me to hold my own tears back until I turned around, but as a parent, I had to. It was so difficult watching my baby leave and not understand what was happening, but I had no words to tell her. There were even times when I wanted to kidnap her, but I knew that I would fail and end up worse off. Seeing her briefly, and then having to walk away, though, was the hardest and most painful part of being separated.

In the process of reunification, did you discover things about yourself—strengths, abilities, passions that helped you achieve your goals?

On my hardest days when I wanted to give up, I found the inner strength to keep going when I thought about my daughter. I refused to lose two daughters in one year. Seeing and feeling my daughter pull on my leg when it was time to leave our visits every week cut to my core so deeply that I just couldn’t let go. Every action I did was for her, and for the day that we could be reunified.

I also found comfort in journaling throughout my time during my in-patient care. It was a way for me to express and heal the pain in my heart. My journals are now part of my book, Symphony of Redemption.

June is National Reunification Month
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www.ambar.org/nrm
What was the big turning point for you in the case?

Truthfully, the reality that I was getting my daughter back did not sink in until I heard the judge’s decision. My road to recovery was a continual process, but at no time did I believe that my daughter would be reunited with me until it was a reality.

What good came out of the experience, if any?

Staying clean! I never would have gotten clean if my daughter Sunshine had not been taken away from me. When they buried my youngest daughter after she passed away, I relapsed and could have been dead now without the joy and love that having Sunshine back into my life gives me. I was able to regain my daughter, my sanity, my family, and start a career.

Through my treatment, I also started writing my book that has since been published. By far and away though, the most important and priceless thing in the world was turning my life around so that my daughters no longer see me as a disappointment or an embarrassment. Now they are proud of me, and inspired by the work I do with my clients.

Could you explain the motivation for your book and what readers can expect?

When I started writing during my time at in-patient care, I had no idea that seven years later my journals would be published in a full-length book. During that time, I wrote because I felt that it was important for me to get out all of my secrets in order to be able to live with them better.

These journals were never meant to be public, but I remember someone in care telling me, “you should get published.” Sure enough, a Penguin/Random House Publishing Company reached out to me soon after that, Symphony of Redemption was a real book!

... The spine statement of my book is really that it’s a big deal to survive through life’s hardest parts, and that love is the best way to heal and turn your life around.

"The inspiration for my story comes from my belief that it’s important that as humans, particularly women, we understand that life can be painful at times; whether it be sexual abuse, or violence, but joy is possible on the other side. I hope that women who feel alone can read my book and feel supported and loved, knowing that we are all tied together through life’s hardest experiences."
Tell me about one person that was a big help in getting your children back?

My husband was my rock and support system throughout the whole process of losing our daughter and fighting to reunify. My husband did everything in his power to keep our family going while I was in in-patient care; he would go buy groceries and bring them to the treatment center and even bought our daughter birthday presents from me when I couldn’t go buy them myself.

He even married me during that time! When our youngest daughter passed away we both broke down, but through the darkest days my husband helped keep hope alive. He believed in me when I didn’t believe in myself and asked me to be his wife when I couldn’t even love myself.

Was there anyone else that was important in helping you get your children back?

My program manager Heather was a huge inspiration to me throughout my addiction and battle for my daughter. She had previously struggled with a similar addiction and so I believed that if she could do it, so could I. She was a huge mentor to me, and I hope she knows what a tremendous difference she made during my recovery process.

Additionally, my social worker Lori Haro helped me to get through some of my hardest days. During my time in treatment, I remember one night when I just wanted to walk out and give up. But Lori talked me down and forced me to understand that if I left that night I would lose my daughter forever. She knew that I was in pain, but reminded me of my long term goal and for that I am forever grateful.

Were there services that you did not have that you would have found helpful?

When I was going through treatment, Good Samaritan Services did not have a Parent Partner program in place yet. Once I got clean, I was actually hired as one of the first Parent Partner advocates in Santa Maria County. This job has made me the happiest person; I really don’t think I could love my job any more than I already do. Every morning I wake up excited for the day ahead, and proud to work for such an amazing organization.

Tell me about Good Samaritan Services?

Good Samaritan Services has nineteen different programs in Santa Barbara County, including a perinatal program for mothers and children under the age of five that aims to give them the tools they need to get back on their feet.

When I struggled with my addiction I stayed in one of their recovery communities, and the people there really helped me get back on my feet. Good Samaritan Services employs a lot of strong female staff who I continue to look up to as an employee. The community here emanates great energy and positivity to all of the people that seek help with us.
What is your role as a Parent Partner advocate at Good Samaritan?

On any given day, I usually wake up and go to meet some of my clients. It’s important for me to make myself available 24 hours a day, and wherever my clients need me. Sometimes I meet them at coffee shops, and other times I work with clients that currently live in the same treatment program that I lived at.

One day a week I am in court advocating for my clients with their legal team, and once a month I get to write and present a report in front of the caseworkers and judges that highlights all the progress my clients are making.

It’s such an amazing feeling to watch these people who don’t see the good in themselves find that glimmer of hope when they hear their progress spoken aloud. Watching these women turn their lives around, and re-develop their self-worth reminds me how important my job is and why I do this work.

What is the biggest thing you would want someone else to know about your experience? Other parents? Attorneys? Child welfare staff? Judges?

It’s so important for people to understand that addiction is not anyone’s first choice. No one wants to live like that, but in order to help them overcome this problem; we need to get to the underlying issues that are causing these problems. I can’t believe I lived like that myself and hurt my family in ways I can’t even fathom. I just want people to understand that people who struggle like I did with addiction want a way out.

The resources are available out there to help people beat their problems, but recognizing hope and the good in these people is the only way these resources will fully be utilized. At Good Samaritan, we use an approach called the “Trauma Informed System of Care,” which allows clients to deal with the underlying causes of addiction. We see addiction as a symptom, and know that when we approach addiction from this perspective, we can help clients heal their underlying issues and become whole again.

What advice would you give to judges, agency directors, legislators, governors, or the president about how to improve the system?

Along the same lines as the previous question, it’s so important that we integrate all the FREE resources available for people who need help. I’m currently working with City Policy Council to discuss how to better address the needs of people in the Santa Maria community. I want people to know that treating people with addiction is not about fixing the short term problem, but instead finding the root cause of the problem so that the problem does not come back in the future.

Is there anything else about you or your experience we should highlight?

I’d like to give the glory to God. Every human life is important. We are all connected to one another in spirit, and are equally valuable in the big picture. My main source of help was, and continues to be, Jesus. I was blessed with the strength from God to recover, and now I am using my story to help moms just like me recover. My life’s work now is to help as many people as I can find the hope and joy they need to get through hard times.

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