

# Shannon's Interview with Danielle Fernekees

April 17, 2018

## *Willing To Go To Any Lengths*



### **SL: Please describe your childhood**

**DF:** I had a beautiful childhood. I have amazing parents who loved and provided for me beyond anything I could ask for. My Papa Ben, who was my best friend, lived with us for many years. One of my favorite memories as a child was cuddling up with my grandfather at night with popcorn and he would read me stories from his big ornate golden bible and we would go through old family photos. Despite my grandfather's attempts to cultivate my relationship with God, I got lost at a very early age. Trouble started for me in school. I fell victim to abuse, trauma and bullying in elementary school, which set off the beginning of many years of abusive patterns and behaviors.

### **SL: How and when did addiction begin manifesting and at what age?**

**DF:** I discerned at an early age that I was different and believed there was something broken or missing in me. I was always in search for something more. I believe that my addiction was manifesting from the start but

it wasn't until I got to school and suffered my first trauma that I can see my addiction starting to unfold. I was about 14 when I realized that alcohol and drugs, was my answer to filling the void in my soul. I was too young to know how to deal with the feelings of shame that came along with trauma. I don't know if it's the old school Italian family thing, but we never aired our dirty laundry, so I found comfort by stuffing the shame down with outside fixes. We kept our secrets in the home and barely talked about issues with each other and we surely never shared it with the outside world. When I first got into recovery my mother would say to me "Dani, do you have to tell everybody everything?" I do because my story can help someone else struggling and I am only sick as my secrets. She has come around over the years of my recovery, because she has seen the change in me and how it helps others, but that was a struggle for me, because I never wanted her to feel shame, by the things I had done.

### **SL: How did your addiction progress from there:**

**DF:** From the age of 14-35, I filled the void in my heart and numbed my feelings with alcohol, drugs and bad relationships. I not only functioned, but I excelled for many years. I graduated Magna Cum Laude from St. Michael's College in Vermont. I lived in Firenze, Italy for a semester. I started my own Decorative Art and Mural business, Designs by Danielle, which was a huge success for 10 years. I was travelling and painting all over the world. I became the artist I always dreamed of being and the artist that everyone else expected for me to be. I was

# Shannon's Interview with Danielle Fernekees

April 17, 2018

## *Willing To Go To Any Lengths*

making a lot of money and living a fast-paced dangerous life. It looked like I had it all together but I was miserable on the inside. The whole time I was filling the void inside of me with outside fixes. I was on a cocktail of prescribed meds for anxiety, depression and ADD. I was also taking anything I could get my hands on to feel anything other than what was going on inside of me. I was like a vortex of chaos and confusion and I took people hostage. I made the world a dark scary place for myself and for everyone who loved me. By 35, I was under 90lbs and addicted to Heroin. I lost my business, lost or sold everything I worked so hard for and my family and friends were devastated. I had become a liar and a thief and I wanted to die.

### **SL: Can you describe your path towards recovery?**

**DF:** I woke up one morning and as usual I couldn't get up without getting a fix. Something was different that morning, I had hit my bottom. All I could think about was the disappointment and fear I had seen in my Father's eyes at the latest mess I had made. I literally rolled onto my knees, sobbing and prayed to a God that I didn't even believe in. I had surrendered. I felt the hand of God reach down and hold me. I will never forget the tiniest little spark of light go on inside me. That was the day my recovery started. I walked away from heroin that day. I can't say that I put away all drugs that day, but I was done with heroin. That's a miracle. Most people do not just walk away from a drug like heroin. It was the hardest and most painful thing I ever did. I dangerously kicked heroin and benzos, at the same time on my own. I

know this was all God's grace and not me. I started going to AA meetings sometimes 3 times a day. I did everything they told me to do. I got a sponsor, who is still my sponsor 8 years later, and I started the steps immediately. I was too scared not to do everything I was told to do. I had to relearn how to live. I had the mentality of a 14-year-old and I had no idea how to live without a chemical substance in my body.

### **SL: What has helped you maintain your Recovery?**

**DF:** God, The Fellowships of AA and NA, the steps and my son...in that order. Without God and the fellowship, I don't get to be a mother, a daughter, a sister, a friend or even a functional member of society. I dove into the steps hard and I did the work like I have never done anything in my life. Not because I am better or smarter than anyone, but because I was going to die. Quickly, my bad behaviors started falling away and they were being replaced with grace and humility. The gifts of sobriety started coming quick because I was doing the work. I lived my Cursillo, (Cursillo provides an experience of spiritual renewal and a method for Christian living) my first year in recovery, which ignited my unique relationship with Jesus and I have been on fire with Him ever since. I am still very active in the Cursillo community, sharing my testimony, participating on a team and was just recently asked to lead a prison ministry for women at MCI Framingham in 2019. I had my son, Benjamin, my second year of recovery and I know that he is God's gift to me for doing the right thing. I don't take this gift lightly and I know that I don't get

# Shannon's Interview with Danielle Fernekees

April 17, 2018

## *Willing To Go To Any Lengths*

to be his mother if I pick up. Benjamin comes to meetings with me and at 6 he is quick to tell me "we need a meeting" or will come out with an AA slogan when I need to hear it most. My son and I are always exploring ways to give back to those who are sick and suffering. We go out on the streets several times a season and bring necessities to our homeless brothers and sisters. We have been doing this since Benjamin was 2. It is a reminder to me of where I have been and it teaches my son about compassion and humility. 7 ½ years into recovery, I still go to meetings and I still meet with my sponsor every week. I now sponsor other women and take them through the steps. I spend quality time with my family of blood and my family of understanding. I talk to other addicts daily and I surround myself with Godly friends. I know that my fellowship friends and brothers and sisters in Christ keep me accountable and guide me in love. I recently started working with a Spiritual Advisor every week, as I knew that my plate was getting too full and I needed some extra guidance. I know my limits today and I know when I'm struggling and need Godly discernment. These are all ways that I maintain my recovery today. Its daily work but I have never known such peace. I don't have all the material things that I used to have, but I have a peaceful mind and heart and a life better than I could have ever dreamed.

**SL: What advice would you give someone just beginning their steps towards recovery?**

**DF:** Tomorrow never comes... we can talk ourselves out of recovery very easily. Don't beat yourself up with shame and self-hate.

No one can make us feel any worse than we already feel about ourselves. Get honest and be willing to go to any lengths. Find a fellowship that fits...you will know your people the first time you actually hear the message. Don't compare, just listen. You will know when your heart cracks open just enough that a seed has been planted. Do the work. Surround yourself with people in recovery. Get a sponsor that you trust. This is life or death, so listen to the suggestions. Just "keep coming" ...I always hated that slogan in the beginning, but I kept coming and that crack eventually opened up enough that I was able to let God in. Most of all I would say to anyone struggling, if you don't have a higher power yet, that's ok. I didn't have one either when I got here. Borrow my God, until you find one. I have a great God and enough faith for the both of us. Ask Him for help. He will, if you let Him. He lifted me out of the darkness of bondage and guided me to a beautiful life. If He did it for me, He will do it for you. Know that you never have to be alone again. I will believe in you, until you are able to believe in yourself.

