

Grace: I told myself I must be a horrible mother for basically feeding my child poison. How could I have done this? I am such a monster.

Scotty Sandow: Hi, I'm Scotty Sandow.

Chris Gray: And I'm Chris Gray, and welcome to The Placer Life. We have somebody new joining us today. Tell us who you are and what you do.

Katie P.: Hi, I'm Katie Combs Prichard. I am new to Placer County and I work doing public information work in our health and human services department.

Scotty Sandow: This is Katie's first report on The Placer Life.

Chris Gray: What are you here to talk to us about today, Katie?

Katie P.: Today you're gonna hear a story about child abuse, which is obviously a very difficult topic. This is a story that starts out in a pretty dark place, but I think it ends up in a place that's much more hopeful, so I hope you'll stick it out and listen the whole way through. Our main character today, her name is Grace. That's not her real name, but it's the name that she chose when I gave her the choice.

Grace: They've used Grace as a fake name before.

Katie P.: We're also gonna use fake names for her husband and for her son, but all of these are real people and they all live here in Placer County.

Grace: For years, I struggled with addiction. I was in and out of jail. Been in trouble with the law and just going down a very destructive path. My drug of choice was heroin and his drug of choice was meth, so right from the very beginning our relationship was toxic. If you can just imagine two people habitually getting high together on illegal drugs, and on top of that physically, verbally, and emotionally abusing each other on a regular basis to a point where it was normal for us.

I was that person who didn't have the strength to leave a bad situation. Dan and I, in our unhealthy minds, we thought that having a baby would change our life. That was the solution that we came up with. We just knew that a baby would change our life for the better. When I became pregnant, it was so hard to quit, much harder than I thought it would be, and I didn't have the willpower to stop using drugs. I didn't care about my well being or the well being of this unborn baby growing inside me. I was in such a hopeless place. I was so lost. I remember thinking to myself that I was going to bring this baby into a world of drugs and violence. It felt like I had no way out of it.

I just had this picture perfect image in my mind of what a family should look like, and that was Mom, Dad, and baby, no matter what the consequences were. When I was seven months pregnant, Dan and I got in the worst fight we

had ever been in. I got two black eyes, a broken nose, my front three teeth were chipped, and I had scratches all over my face from my broken glasses. Dan was arrested and taken to jail for domestic violence and I was taken to the hospital. I remember sitting in the hospital bed thinking, I'm bringing this baby in a world of drugs and violence.

It took almost a month for my face to heal and look normal again. I was wearing a nose cast a week before my baby shower. Dan was still in jail when the baby was born. Our son was born four weeks early. Despite what I had done to my body because of drugs, thankfully, our son was healthy and I was able to go home two days later.

When our son was three weeks old, my addiction caught up to me. I was breastfeeding my child while using heroin and meth. I was basically feeding my child poison. My mom had found paraphernalia under my bed. She knew that I was breastfeeding and she immediately called the cops, which is what any loving person would do. She was only trying to protect her grandbaby. I was so angry. I blamed everyone else around me. I didn't take ownership for what I was doing. It took me a long time to realize that I was doing any kind of wrong. I blamed my wrong. I blamed Dan for the abuse. It was so easy for me to point at everyone else but myself. But that phone call saved my life.

When the cops found me, I was at Dan's house with our son. I was obviously under the influence. I could barely communicate with them. My speech was slurred. I couldn't make eye contact, and I had this newborn baby that I was holding. A social worker showed up and she told me that they needed to take our son to the hospital to make sure that he was okay. In that moment, I knew that they were going to take my son away. An ambulance showed up. The double doors opened. The medics lifted him up in the back of the ambulance, shut the doors, and they drove off. I just remember standing in the street, thinking to myself, how could this have happened? How in the world did I get in this place where my son is gone? Why am I not sad or crying? I remember not one tear fell from my eye. I was so numb, I couldn't feel a thing, and I just told myself I must be a horrible mother.

That night, I was taken to jail. I was taken to jail. I was charged with felony child endangerment, possession of drugs, under the influence, and paraphernalia. While I was in jail, I sobered up a little bit and another cop started to question me. I realized I had to make a decision. Was I going to continue down this destructive path I was on or am I going to do something different and be a present parent for my child that he needs and deserves?

I now had an open CPS case in Placer County.

Katie P.:

I think Child Protective Services cases are pretty unthinkable to most people, but they actually take place more often than you'd think. I sat down with Eric Branson, who's an assistant director with Placer County's Children's System of Care, and I talked to him a little bit about that.

How prevalent is child abuse and neglect here in Placer? How many referrals do you typically get in a year?

Eric Branson: We get about 3500 calls or so. Of those, we probably evaluate out for lack of evidence and don't investigate at all about close to half of those. The remainder, we may do a brief investigation on some and close them quickly once we realize that there's no actual abuse going on. In terms of cases that get referred to our ongoing child welfare teams for an actual case, of those, the ongoing cases, there probably generally at any given time are around 300 to 325 ongoing cases that our folks are working.

I think, relatively speaking, we're a wealthy county, and so I think sometimes that insulates people from recognition that we do have some significant child abuse issues. It can certainly take place at every socioeconomic level and class of society.

Katie P.: Grace is really proof of that. She says she was never the type of person anyone would expect would become an abuser or an addict.

Grace: I was the goody two shoes. I was that person. I was the person who I was that student who got good grades, had perfect attendance, never skipped school. I think the worst thing I did in high school was lie to go to a school dance, because my mom wouldn't let me. I grew up in a really strict household. My mom was very religious, so we went to Bible Studies three times a week. Did piano lessons for over 10 years, and my dad has a military background. We grew up in a very strict household. I had to set an example for my sisters to follow. Do your homework, get good grades, be respectful to your elders, and do what they ask. I did. I did all that. I was a good daughter. I was a good student.

When I was old enough to get a job, I did, and I saved up my money and moved out for the very first time. Moving in a house with roommates who drank, among other things, I was very naïve going into this situation because I had never gone to a party where people drank in high school. I just wasn't that person. When I entered that world and was introduced to the party scene, I just thought, "Oh, this is normal. College students party. This is just what I'm supposed to do." I was that person who overdid it. Don't know why I didn't understand at the time why I would take it to another level, but right from the very beginning, I abused alcohol and I abused drugs.

I jumped in the deep end. This disease, it is a disease. It doesn't discriminate. Any kind of person. It's a problem. It's a disease. It's like a cancer. If it goes left untreated, it can kill you. It'll take away your self-respect, your dignity. It'll take away anything important to you. It tears down relationships, families, friends. It'll take everything away from you.

A few days after I was released from jail, I met my social worker. She is just the sweetest lady you could ever meet. Gave me no reason not to like her, but I

absolutely resented her. I did not like her at all. Not one bit. She was this high authority figure in my life. I remember feeling like CPS had kidnapped my child and I'm the only one in this world who has the right to look over my baby.

Eric Branson:

It's a natural feeling of resistance. You are interfering in one of the most intimate relationships in life, the relationship between a parent and a child. People are gonna naturally feel resistance towards you.

We used to approach child abuse investigation as beginning to build our case for court immediately and moving towards potentially detention. Nowadays, what we do under a thing called Safety Organized Practice is we really try and pull together the family's support. We determine if we can provide safety or feel like there's safety in the home without detaining the child, because detaining a child provides a separate trauma for them, for a different reason. If there's any way that we can keep them in the home, but keep them safe. I want to emphasize that. I'm not saying we'd ever leave a vulnerable child unprotected. Then that's what we're making an effort to do. There's, all through California, more and more counties.

Grace:

CPS in itself has such a negative connotation and it's hard for many to think of them as helping you. Because of how terrified I was that I'd never see my son again, I did whatever she asked. At that time, I had no idea what a gift it was having that CPS case open. It was really an opportunity to change my life for the better and have a life of quality, and that was the beginning of my journey.

I had no idea the variety of ways that Placer County could help families, even in the most desperate of situations. My social worker asked me to do two things: check myself into drug and alcohol treatment, and therapy. I did both of those. I completed treatment. I am so grateful I was able to meet with a therapist because I was able to gain so much insight on myself and work through trauma I had experienced, and when I realized that these supports and services being offered to me are something that not everybody gets and as a parent, I'm learning tools of how to be the best parent, a healthy parent, for my son, so I took full advantage of it and reached out to people in the community. I started asking my social worker questions and told her I'd really benefit from domestic violence classes and parenting classes.

I remember going to my parenting classes, and I still use the tools that I learned. I was able to see Riley twice a week for one hour, and they were supervised visits, but those two days of the week were such good days because every time I went to go see him, I took a bazillion pictures. He was a newborn baby at the time, and I just knew that he was going to grow so fast. At the same time, I knew eventually if I kept doing the right thing and I worked towards providing a safe and secure home for him, that I would get him back. I stayed patient, honest, open minded, and willing to the whole team of people around me who committed to helping me and invested their time in helping build my family up when they didn't have to, but they went out of their way because they believed in us, before I started believing in myself.

Katie P.: As Grace was kind of navigating this path, her partner was making a very similar journey of his own.

Grace: In the beginning, I feel like I was alone, and I told myself, my son only needs one healthy parent to fall back on. I was working my butt off to do everything I could to work on myself. I set a boundary with Dan and said, "You are just as much as an addict as I am and you did just as much damage, and if you don't get help, it's just not going to work and our son only needs one healthy parent, and it's gonna be me. I can do this with or without you." Thankfully, he met me in the middle and asked our social worker for the same treatment that I was getting.

Placer County Health and Human Services had a huge role in helping us dig ourselves out of that deep hole that we were in, because at that time with no jobs, our only income being CalWORKs, we didn't think it was possible to have a place we could call our home. We were able to find low income housing in Auburn, and we gained our first home as a family. Shortly after attaining our first home, our CPS case closed because we were able to prove ourselves healthy people and could provide a safe and secure home for our son.

Katie P.: What's the bar for closing a case then?

Eric Branson: We've changed our approach to that a little bit. What the law says is that you have to provide reasonable services. The parents have to take advantage of those services and show that they're making improvement. We're really emphasizing the show they're making improvement now more over what services they do because we realized over time just doing a checklist of services, if you weren't really engaged or didn't care or were very involved doesn't necessarily mean or prove that you are prepared to have your children back in the home, or you've resolved the issues that are involved.

Grace: It took just a little less than a year until we were able to be independent and have stability. Dan and I just recently celebrated our four year clean and sober birthday. Our son has never seen us under the influence. He has never seen us get in a physical, verbal fight.

Katie P.: Tell me about Riley now and some of the things you enjoy most as a mother.

Grace: Riley is amazing. He's my world. I love him so much. Right now, he's four years old and he'll be starting preschool next month. He's a big boy. He just upgraded to a big boy bed. We just did that this last weekend, put together his big boy bed. He's just my little miracle. I love him so much. He teaches me so much and I'm just so happy that he's never witnessed any kind of abuse.

Katie P.: Do you think he'll ever tell him your story? Do you want him to know that?

Grace: His dad and I talk about it every once in a while. You know, I'm not sure. When it comes time to ... Of course, everything age appropriate when explaining to him,

so when it comes time that he needs to be educated about how to build healthy relationships, whether it's friends at school, friends at church, or a girlfriend, not any time soon, we'll teach him what is safe and not safe. What kind of qualities do you want to see in a friend or a partner. What things to look out for in school. Of course we want to talk to him about addiction, drug addiction and alcoholism. We want him to be aware of the negative things out there that can take him down a dark path. As far as sharing our story, his dad and my story, we'll cross that bridge when we get there.

Katie P.: Even though Grace isn't sure about sharing all the details with her son, she does share her story pretty regularly with other parents who are accused of abuse or neglect. It's kind of her way of giving back.

Grace: Today, I work for a nonprofit organization called Community Recovery Resources, also known as CORE. We work with men and women who are battling the disease of addiction. Some have a history of domestic violence. Some are struggling with mental illness. Some struggle with a combination of all. Today, I work directly with kids and I get to watch miracles happen as mothers and fathers come to treatment trying to better their lives. I get to share with them tools and resources that would help support them in creating that happy and healthy family at home, and I get to believe in people, even when they don't first believe in themselves. I find great value in that because that's where it all started for me.

In addition to this, i also volunteer my time with Children's System of Care. I'm one of the co-facilitators for the monthly dependency court parent orientation class.

Eric Branson: She's probably one of our primary people who's consistently volunteered to be there and do a dependency court orientation for our new parents. A lot of these people, you're meeting them on their worst day. This is the worst day they've had, and whether or not they're reaching the bottom of the substance abuse issue, and part of that consequence is they're gonna be without their kids for a while, or a domestic violence situation that just spun out of control. That's the mindset people are coming in with. They just know their kids are gone. They are in foster care or with a relative. They're feeling really pretty despondent most of the time.

A lot of times, what's been so gratifying about this orientation is a lot of times, they'll leave and they'll look. Their affect will look completely changed. It'll look completely different because of the impact of hearing those stories from those parents and realizing that what the county wants is really for them to reunify with their parents, and that we'll give them every possible chance and resource to do that, which we can say it all day long until we're blue in the face, but until you hear it from a parent that's been through it, that's an entirely different experience.

Grace: I just want others to know that change is possible and there's hope out there. Kids need that healthy parent to fall back on. They didn't ask to be brought into this world and they deserve to grow up in a world that they can grow up to be happy and healthy and be loved and just be bombarded with hugs and kisses. They deserve all that. They deserve all that.

It did take a while for me to start to believe that I am a good mom, I am a good person, but it was the choices that I made that were very poor. I'm aware now of the things that I did wrong and today I get to make a living amends to my child and everyone around me that I hurt by not doing those horrible things again. I get to be there for my son, for his first day of school soon. I get to enroll him in T-ball in the near future. I get to wake up in the middle of the night if he's crying. I get to do those things. I get to brush his teeth. I get to tuck him in bed and read him a story every night. I get to do these things. I get to cook for him. I get to bathe him. I get to calm him down when he's having a tantrum. They're all gifts. Everything, all of it, that I get to be there for my son today.

Scotty Sandow: Katie, if someone is interested in learning more about how they can help with the problem of child abuse, where can they go to find more information?

Katie P.: We have some resources on our Placer County website, but we also encourage folks to connect with our partner Kids First. They're our partner in the community that does a lot of really great work in this area, and their website is kidsfirstnow.org. We encourage you to go there, explore, and check out some of the information. Yeah, we really appreciate Grace being so forthcoming and willing to share her story with all of us here today.

Scotty Sandow: Special thank you to Eric Branson with the Placer County Children's System of Care.

Chris Gray: Thanks to all of you for listening. That does it for this episode of The Placer Life. We'll see you next time.