

Star news

A mother's love

North Philly mom maintains sobriety working with ACT II at JEVS in the River Wards.



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Feb 28 · 4 min read



Staying strong: Jennifer Burke, 41, spends time with her daughter, Ariana. Burke points to her children as her main motivation to stay clean. PHOTO: LINETTE KIELINSKI

By Melissa Komar

By outward appearances, Jennifer Burke, 41, is the typical stay-at-home mom.

The North Philly resident lives in an apartment with two of her daughters, 9 and 10.

“I take them to school, do homework with them every day, cook, and do all the usual stuff every day,” she said. “Right now, I don’t have a job, but I’m looking for one.”

But, taking them to school every day, they became more and more aware of the well-known and documented opioid crisis unfolding under the tunnels near their school at the intersection of B and Lehigh.

Burke was quickly reminded of how, not too long ago, she was in the grips of the same addiction.

“They see everything they see on the streets now. I don’t look down on anybody, but I don’t want my daughters seeing that,” she said. “Right at Lehigh, they would see all the people living under the bridge.”

Today, Burke is five years clean.

Aside from all her parenting duties, she participates in the Achievement through Counseling and Treatment (ACT II) program by JEVS Human Services at 1745 N. Fifth St.

It’s how, motivated by the thought she might lose her daughters, Burke has maintained her sobriety and is now encouraging others at ACT their goals aren’t out of reach.

But, it was a long road to reach this point.

Growing up in Wissinoming, Burke started drinking when she was barely a teenager and moved on to smoking marijuana and taking pain pills by the time she was 15.

Opiates didn’t enter the picture until she reached her early 20s, but she did everything else imaginable, including acid, up until that point in her life.

“I got prescribed Percocets for a C-section with my 18-year-old daughter and then I just started taking Percocets. From Percocets, I went to OxyContin, and from OxyContin, I went to heroin,” she said.

Burke can’t recall when she got hooked, but she estimates she was in her mid-20s.

Amidst the struggle of addiction, Burke managed to get clean a couple of times, but always relapsed.

In March 2006, Burke went into a detox at Kirkbride Center, 111 N. 49th St., and started taking methadone.

Burke transferred to Parkside Center, 5000 Parkside Ave., in June 2006 and started taking Xanax and Klonopin, along with her prescribed methadone.

She remained with the program until 2010, when she was kicked out of the program for allegedly selling pills, and moved on to Kensington Hospital Methadone Maintenance Program, 136 W. Diamond St.

“I was still doing dope here and there [at Parkside], but when I got pregnant, I was clean,” Burke said. “I was clean the whole time. I stayed clean for my kids, but then at Kensington, here and there, I was messing up again, doing Xanax, taking pills. But then I got kicked off for not having insurance.”

From there, she made her way to ACT II with JEVS.

“I was messing up a little bit when I got here, doing dope and everything and pills and then I got clean again,” Burke said. “After a couple months of being here, I got clean and I’ve been clean ever since.”

She heard about the program through one of JEVS’ funders, which covered her expenses to attend the program.

Burke entered the program at the highest level of treatment, participating in group therapy for four months, three times a week, three hours each session.

Over the past five years, Burke has completed every level of the program, and is now down to the lowest treatment option. She received methadone four times a week and meets with her counselor monthly.

“The main reason I got clean wasn’t just for myself, it was for my kids. I didn’t want to lose my kids. They’re the main reason I stay clean. I don’t want my kids to see me the way I used to be, getting high and everything,” she said.

Prior to arriving at ACT II, someone called DHS on Burke. That was a turning point.

“It was either my girls getting taken or me getting straight,” she said.

Ali Nagao, the director of operations and compliance for the program, knows Burke’s devotion to her daughters well.

“Jennifer is a wonderful mother. She puts her children first through everything. She does everything for them,” she said. “She’s made huge improvements. She’s one of our model patients. She’s at where most patients want to be, in her home life and her life here.”

Burke also takes the time to talk to other patients in the program, sharing her story and offering support, according to Nagao.

“It gives us so much hope for other patients. When you see a patient like Jen, who has come so far, it really helps know what you’re doing is the right thing. It’s very encouraging,” she said. “And, she’s very encouraging to other patients.”

“You’re able to do it. Just keep fighting every day. And, once you do, every day gets easier,” Burke added. “I know people who are still in their addiction and I don’t look down on anyone. But, there are options out there. I just tell people they can do better. Look at me. I did it and you can, too.”

With her sobriety under her belt, Burke hopes to find a job and possibly go back to school.

She doesn’t rule out working in the field that helped her turn her life around.

“I would work in drug and alcohol in a heartbeat,” she said. “My one goal is to transfer to another spot in PHA. I just want my daughters to have a good life and be happy. I want to be able to give them whatever they want. And, stay clean.”