

FAMILY UNIFICATION HEROES

Communities Supporting Family Unification

BRIDGET AND RODNEY BOWMAN HONORED SUPPORT TEAM: SHAWN P.

Rodney and Bridget's family unification story is a testament to hard work and dedication to family. Their journey through the child welfare system began at a period in their lives when both were struggling with substance use disorder. Despite the challenges of getting and staying sober, they were committed to regaining custody of their son, Brandon, following his removal. With her fierce independence and unwavering advocacy, Bridget was able to reunify with Brandon while still in treatment at Noble House. Following graduation, Bridget secured housing and patiently waited for her family to reunify. Due to his consistent effort to maintain sobriety and reunify with his family, Rodney joined Bridget and Brandon upon graduating from the Serenity House.

Rodney and Bridget credit several people and organizations in helping them reunify with Brandon, but their dedication and love for each other stand out as the reason their family is together again.

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BRIDGET BOWMAN

Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your family?

I'm Bridget Bowman. I have a 10-year-old, Brandon, and my spouse is Rodney Bowman. I graduated from Family Recovery Court and then Noble House Ministries in 2024. I was battling drug addiction, which is part of how my case started. I'm almost two years clean now, and everything's going great.

My son Brandon wants to be a roboticist. He's into rigging things. For example, he found out that if he takes two AA batteries and connects them to the speaker wires, the speaker makes noise. He took the little fan out of a computer tower and was able to make that work on AA batteries. He wants to build robots for the military, like little spy robots. He wants them to be small like a bee.

DCS got involved in my life when Brandon's school called. Brandon had a friend over, and his friend thought it was so cool that we lived like the Amish. For example, our lights were powered by 12-volt batteries. I had a hand pump and a wood burner for cooking and heat. We had coolers with ice for cold stuff. His friend thought it was so cool that he told the whole school about it. The school didn't think it was that cool. So, DCS came out and wanted to drug screen us. Rodney consented to his, but I didn't consent to mine. DCS had to get a drug screen court-ordered, and that's how it started.

What was the hardest part about being separated?

The hardest part for me was knowing that Brandon is the only kid I could have. The opportunity for me to have more kids had to be taken from me by surgery. Also, I made a promise to myself when I was pregnant with Brandon that I wasn't going to put him through the same thing that I went through as a child. And I basically just did, I repeated my mom. I'm like, I'm identical to her, I guess. Even though that wasn't my intention. It wasn't what I planned. It just happened.

What helped you stay connected to Brandon and stay grounded during your separation from him?

Knowing that I was working on getting him at Noble House with me helped me stay grounded. I was working to get a family room, and once I got the family room, that really made it...I don't know how to explain the feeling. Each step that my attorney told me to do. I was on it. I was like, "I want to try this," "I've been doing this," "Can I ask for this in court next?" She'd be like, "Yes, but we need to have a plan." So, just working with my attorney and having a plan really helped me keep moving forward.

"What am I most proud of? Where I'm at today in my recovery."

How did it feel when you were reunited?

It felt amazing. We didn't all get reunited at the same time, though. Brandon got reunited with me first. Me and Brandon were at a Noble House for a while until I finished the last phase, which was hard for me to get Brandon to understand. He kept trying to get us evicted so we could move into our trailer. I didn't even have furniture in it or anything yet. But once I was able to graduate and move out into the trailer, Rodney was able to come see us on the weekends on his passes. Then, like a month and a half later, we all got to be reunited. It was a slow process.

What are you most proud of now?

What am I most proud of? Where I'm at today in my recovery. I also love my job. I have a decently paying job. I love the place that I was able to rent with my family. I love that I graduated. I love that I got out of DCS.

What helped you through that time—both personally and through your support network?

Half of my support was Rodney and I's love. The other half was my lawyer. My lawyer was awesome. Anytime something would go wrong, like I was supposed to have a visit, and then I wouldn't get a visit because of whatever dumb reason, my lawyer moved heaven and earth for me. I think that's my other biggest support, my attorney.

What were some of your strengths, interests, or values that helped you keep going?

What I really like about myself is how independent I try to be. The Noble House was trying to tell me I've been trying to be too independent because I'm in a relationship. It's one of my strong suits, but I guess I try to be too independent. That's what Rodney's trying to work on with me. I need to actually let people help me because I was trying to do everything.

I didn't want help, but he tried to tell me, "You need to let people help you sometimes." For example, while at Noble House, I was trying to get my furniture from my house. I was going to take a point that day so I could get it. Noble House asked, "Why don't you have Rodney do it?" At the time, Rodney didn't have a vehicle, so I was setting up an appointment to get a U-Haul and everything. He worked 3rd shift, so he slept during the day, and he was at Serenity House. Even though Noble House tried to get me to let Rodney help me, I was trying to do everything on my own. I just didn't want to let him do it.

I guess that's a fun thing I like about myself. If anything goes wrong, I know I can do it. I know I can do things by myself and don't have to rely on anybody. I think that's one strong suit I have that I love about myself.



Where are you and your family today?

I am back in the same trailer park in Albion, where I was living when I had five years sober, before I moved to Ligonier. I've always liked this trailer park. I'm even in a better trailer than what I had before we moved.

The week Rodney got the news about being able to graduate, we got this place. It was really cool because DCS, the Bowen Center, and everybody came out and helped us move in, which was really cool.

So yeah, I'm back where I was once happy before all this.

I'm also financially better. I mean, I have money setbacks, but bills are always paid on time. I have a nicer vehicle. All in all, I'm better all the way around.

At Noble House, I kept asking myself, "Why did I leave Albion?" Growing up in Ligonier, I started using drugs when I was 13 years old. That's why I was so hesitant about going to live on my mom's property in Ligonier, but Rodney wanted to move.

I tried to explain to him, "I don't know about going there." But, well, I was five years sober and thought it might be different now. So, we moved from Albion to Ligonier.

I found out there's nothing different about the area; everything's still the same. It's so easy to run into the wrong crowd.

I got blessed to be able to come to Albion. I prayed about it when I was at Noble House, to be able to be back in the trailer park in Albion. I still ask myself, "How can I have everything that I had before?" Just mind blowing for me.

What message would you want to share with other parents navigating similar challenges?

You can't expect everything to fall into your lap within the week. It depends how far your drug use drove you down. When I was early in my sobriety, I was trying to check boxes off, but it took me 7 months clean before I got my son back. You're not going to get your kid back within the first week. It takes work, time. It doesn't just happen right away. It takes time to get a job. It took me 30 days to find a job. You don't get a job within the same week. Everything that you're trying to gain will take time and work. It's not just going to happen overnight. A lot of recovering addicts think right when they get clean, "Boom! I should have my son back by the end of the week." No, it's a process. It's not just something that happens like that.



RODNEY BOWMAN

Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your family?

I'm Rodney. I have four kids, but with Bridget, we only have Brandon. I'm a recovering Meth addict, and that's what led us to our DCS case. Everything is because of our drug use. I thought it was a great experience what we went through, because I don't think I'd be where I am today if it wasn't for the help of the actual DCS. They've helped out a lot. So did Family Recovery Court, and then the Serenity House. I graduated from Serenity House after being there for nine months. Next month, I get to celebrate two years clean and sober.

I've been told it's very rare that a couple goes into it together and comes out together. We're one of the really rare situations. A lot of people have tried to test our love for each other and have failed. So, I mean, that's all I can say, our love is stronger than anything.

What would you like to share about Brandon?

He likes Minecraft and Fortnite, stuff like that. When he was six, we made our own solar charger out of cardboard and aluminum foil. It worked well enough to charge a phone. That was all his idea, you know. I just cut the utensils where I needed to, told him where they go, and everything. He did it all by himself, but I instructed him on it.

Lately, he's been wanting to build our own little cardboard fan that runs off of rubber bands. Once you spin it, the rubber bands keep it spinning, and it'll spin and spin and spin. He's pretty interested in making things. He told me the other day that if he couldn't be a roboticist, he wants to be an engineer. I told him, "Well, keep up with what you're doing, you can make it."

What challenges were you and your family facing when the system got involved in your life?

We didn't worry about running water in the house because we had the hand pump to get our water. We had the wood burner to cook the food. So, to us, we thought everything was alright. But the struggle was keeping the electricity on to make sure that Brandon really had what he needed when he needed it.

Everything that was because of our drug use was really a struggle. Not being able to pay the electric bill. Neither one of us was working. We were too much into our addiction. That's pretty much all we cared about was when we were going to get our next high and everything. We didn't care that we didn't have electricity because we were running it off batteries.



How did the system respond to your situation?

At first, I hated DCS. I hated them because they were trying to take my son away, and they did. I hated them until we got into Family Recovery Court. I hated DCS because it seemed like they were trying to make everything so difficult. It seemed like they were trying to keep our son and not bring him back. It was like they were coming up with every excuse possible to keep him, and it was hard. But then, we got into the Family Recovery Court. Then I thought DCS was pretty cool because they got me into rehab. They're the ones that got me into the Serenity House and everything. So that's when my opinion of DCS changed, because then I started realizing they were actually for us getting back together.

What was the hardest part about being separated?

I have two things that were really hard for me. The hardest was watching DCS drive out of our driveway with my son. That was really hard on me because Brandon was a big daddy's boy. I'd go outside to work on my lawnmower, and he was right there with me, wanting to learn it and everything. He was my shadow, and when they took him, it hit me hard.

Then, once we started getting our visits, every time they would take him to leave after a visit was really hard for me. It was like watching DCS from the beginning taking him from me. It was just too hard for me to handle.

What helped you through that time – both personally and through your support network?

Once we signed up for Family Recovery Court, our case manager at that time helped me out a lot. He's the one that got me into rehab. He's the one that got me into the Serenity House. I was in rehab at Park Center in Fort Wayne. I really like that rehab, and I'm glad they put me there because everybody that works there is in recovery themselves. All the counselors are in recovery themselves, so they were easy to connect with. They made me feel like it was a lot easier to open up and talk.

And then getting into the Serenity House, Shawn didn't have to let me in because I left rehab 2 days early to help Bridget with a chicken coop. He almost didn't let me in. But then he said, "Don't let me regret letting you stay here," and I said, "I won't!" and didn't. I ended up staying there 9 months.

He was a big advocate for me and some of the guys I met at the Serenity House. Even though it's been a little over a year since I graduated Serenity House, I go to the Sunday house meetings every week. I go there sometimes throughout the week to sit with the new guys to give them hope, so they don't think it's the end of the world, and to show them there's life out there other than addiction. Everything I've been through has been a big support for me.

All the people I came in contact with at the Bowen Center were a big help to me too, especially when I didn't have a license. They were willing to take me everywhere I needed to go until I was able to get my license back.

What makes your family unique?

Communication probably would be a good one. If we didn't have communication, we wouldn't be together probably. It takes understanding and communication, and our love for our son. I lost a 2-year-old son in 2005, and when DCS took Brandon, I flipped out. I became suicidal because I couldn't go through the loss of another son, even though there was a possibility I could get him back to me. I was losing another son, and that's what my determination was because I was not going to go and lose another son after already losing one. I know how bad it hurts.

That's one reason why I did it. I didn't want Bridget to lose a son, because I knew how bad it hurt. I did everything I could to get him back and to help get Bridget motivated. At first, Bridget struggled a little bit. But you know, I just kept telling her, keep going. And like I said earlier, I think the love is what just keeps us all together. We just love Brandon, and Brandon loves us. We all get along real good.

"I think love is what keeps us all together. We love Brandon and Brandon loves us."

What were some of your strengths, interests, or values that helped keep you going?

I used having lost a son in 2005 as motivation to get everything going because I didn't want to have that feeling again. When I lost that son, that's when my story actually began. I became a bad alcoholic. I knew that if I lost Brandon, I was on a road to destruction. If that happened, if I never got him back...that possibility really drove me.

Like Bridget, I was used to doing things on my own, so it was just so amazing when I started getting help. Everybody was willing to help me in every way they could. I mean, even the courts. When Bridget's car got impounded, the court paid for the impound fee for her to get the car back. They paid for her to have four new tires on her car. It was really weird for me, having help like that.

But in all honesty, I don't think I'm any more unique than anybody else that's out there. One thing I've learned by going to meetings and everything is that every addict has their own story, but it all seems to tie in together. Some people are worse, some people are better, some people try harder, some people don't. Some people don't need to keep going to meetings. Other people do. Like Bridget, she doesn't go to meetings anymore. I still hit two or three meetings a week, just because I feel that that's what I need.

What helped you stay connected to Brandon and stay grounded during your separation from him?

Just the thought of being able to have him back. The closer that came, and when Bridget got custody back, it started to make things a little easier. I started to see that what we were doing was actually working. It wasn't for nothing. It was actually starting to get us reunited.

Growing up, family was huge. I mean, we used to go to Sunday dinners at my grandma's and stuff like that when I was younger. Every Sunday, our family got together, every holiday. So, I'm a big family guy. So, once I started getting that feeling our family was back together, I knew it was worth it. There was no stopping me then.

Once Bridget got Brandon at the Noble House, that helped keep us connected because I started to get more time with him. Even to this day, he hates the fact that he went to foster care, but he's glad he's back home with us. Now he'll just sit out of the blue be sitting there watching TV and say, "I love you, Daddy" or "I love you, Mommy," and I think by going through this, if anything, it brought us closer together as a family. I think that was really awesome, because I mean, before we didn't quite do things as a family. And then, after all this, it's like we want to go somewhere together. We want to do something together. Somehow, some way, we try to make sure that we can do something as a family.

How did it feel when you were reunited?

I'll never forget the day we were reunited. I'd taken a 24-hour pass and was with Bridget and Brandon at the trailer when I got a phone call from Shawn, the house manager of the Serenity House. Sean goes, "How's it going with the family?" I said, "Man, this is awesome. This is what I live for. It's just too awesome and now that I'm sober, it's a million times better than it's ever been." He goes, "Cool, how would you feel about being able to stay with your family?" I was like, "Well, what do you mean?" because I still had a few more weeks until I graduated Serenity House. He goes, "No, I did some research, and I've already got your certificate made out with today's date." He goes, "Why don't you just say that you're graduated now and start being with your family for good?" And I started crying. I was like, "No, no," and he goes, "Yeah, you're done, be with your family." I said, "Thank you very much, Shawn. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." It felt good because at that moment, right there, I was able to reunite with my family. It was very emotional for me.



Where are you and your family today?

We're more financially stable. We put money in the bank. I'm in between jobs right now, and we're still able to pay our bills. We put our bills before anything else. If we don't have money to put gas in the car for me to go to a meeting, I'm not going to go to a meeting because I don't want to put more strain on her.

We're closer together as a family than what we were before. Because before, like Bridget said, we were out here in the same trailer park, and then we moved. That's when we started using heavy. I started feeling bad because we moved from this trailer park to her mom's house because of me. I'm the one who talked her into doing it. So, I started feeling bad because we might have never gone through our addiction and never had to go through that horrible time. But now I look at it like, okay, God puts us where He wants us, and apparently that's what He wanted us to learn.

Brandon being taken from us opened our eyes that we were too deep in addiction and we had to do something about it. That was when we started getting out of addiction and going into recovery. So, I'm big on the belief that God puts you where He wants you when He wants you.

What are you most proud of now?

I've never been able to get a car without a co-signer, and a little over a year ago we were able to buy a 2021 Kia Sportage. I got that on my own. I didn't need anybody to co-sign for me. I didn't need help from anybody. I got it on my own. And then a few months later, with Bridget on this one, I bought a 2000 Chevy Blazer. So, we've each got our own vehicle now, and we've never had that. We've only ever had one vehicle. We were always fighting over who was going to use it. Now? We don't have to worry about that. If I want to go to a meeting? I can. If Bridget wants to go grocery shopping? No problem. We have both vehicles. So that is one thing I'm really proud of.

But the thing I'm mostly proud of is just being back with my family. Like I said, I'm a family guy. It means everything to me to have Brandon back. It's the world to me.

What message would you want to share with other parents navigating similar challenges?

Not to give up hope even though it may seem like all is lost and that it's the end of the world. It's not.

There are people out there who are willing to help; you've just got to be willing to look for it. You've got to want to look for it. You've got to want it in order to have it. You can't just say, "Yeah, I want my family together," but not do anything to get them back together. You've got to put the work in for it to happen. And that in the end, once it's back, once your family's back together, it's just an amazing feeling. It's like having your family all over again. It's just like Brandon was born again. I got him back, and it was a whole new world, because now there was no addiction or anything. So, I was able to be in the moment with Brandon more often.

Once you get through it, you are able to be in the moment more with your child. You get to go to their music programs and spend time with them. You remember things that you couldn't when you were using. They need to understand that there's light at the end of the tunnel.

"There are people out there who are willing to help; you've just got to be willing to look for it. You've got to want to look for it. You've got to want it in order to have it."

What should judges, caseworkers, or policymakers know to better support families?

Just have a better understanding of substance abuse and what it's like for people going through it. There might be lawyers or judges out there who went through abuse and stuff themselves, but most likely, they don't know what it's really like.

It would be helpful if they did understand. If there were a way they could study it, or something, it would help them better connect with the family because they'll know what the family was going through.

They might not have gone through it, but they'll understand it better.

Is there anything I didn't ask that feels important to share about your journey?

I'm grateful for everybody I've met during my recovery. I made so many new friends and acquaintances that if I'm ever really struggling, all I've got to do is pick up my phone. I've got lots of numbers in my phone of people that'll talk me down. That, to me, is just exactly what I need. I've got the support.

I joined Matrix even after I graduated Family Recovery Court because I wanted to keep getting the tools of recovery. All that I can get. I'm taking advantage of this. If something's going to help me stay clean and sober, I'm going to take it because that's what I want. I want to stay clean and sober. I don't ever want to go down that dark road again, so I'm always looking for ways to help with my sobriety.

HONORED SUPPORT: SHAWN P., SERENITY HOUSE

How did you come to be a part of Rodney's support system?

I was contacted by the Family Restoration court in Noble County about Rodney. I contacted him and accepted Rodney into our program. Rodney committed to staying clean from drugs and alcohol; he committed to getting a sponsor and working the 12 Steps of Recovery. Once he got a foothold in the steps, things really started to click for him, and his life began to change.

What kind of support do you feel was most meaningful to Rodney or his family?

I feel that the full support of the Family Restoration Court played a major role in his recovery. But specifically, I believe that the peer-to-peer support was life-changing for him. He saw me and others truly living this life, learning how to be good dads and productive members of society, and he wanted that.

What does it mean to you to support a family in a way that listens to and honors their lived experience?

Seeing the visits with his children start to take place at the halfway house always makes me feel like we are doing something special with these men. Also, seeing confidence and the light that started to transpire in Rodney's life when he started to believe that he was gaining the skills to maintain and be a stable father.

What do you wish more professionals or systems understood about how families are best supported?

I believe that it takes a collaboration of all systems to make this work. One being the peer support of being in a halfway house, so they can see and start to believe that there is another way to live. Also, a supportive judicial system to understand that this takes time and support to overcome.

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