

The Best Way to Stop Drug Trafficking in America

By the time LaToya Merrill was 15, she had her first baby. She started selling drugs and dating drug dealers so she could get money for diapers for her son.

Scared and desperate, LaToya sought help from a school counselor. But the counselor made things worse when she told LaToya, "You and your son will be statistics. Your son will go to jail. You will probably go to jail too." Those hopeless words discouraged LaToya so much that she dropped out of school just weeks before graduation.

But fortunately LaToya didn't end up on a casualty list. Instead, she found Jesus at the altar of a church in North Carolina several years later. And today she has started a non-profit ministry to help women who are trapped in the cycle of poverty and drugs.

Raised by a single mother in Huntington, West Virginia—sometimes described as the opioid capital of the United States—LaToya was falling through the cracks of a broken culture. She was just 10 years old when she first saw her mother overdose on drugs. The pain drew LaToya to alcohol and she started showing up at school drunk. She eventually began snorting cocaine.

"I hung with some pretty rough people. I didn't have anybody telling me there was hope," LaToya told me last week when I met her at The Refuge, a church she now attends in Conway, South Carolina.

The father of LaToya's first child ended up in prison on drug charges. She then hooked up with another guy, who was an abuser. They had three more children together, but his alcoholism got so bad that he began neglecting the children.

Once he passed out in front of them in a drunken stupor.

“One day he threw a belt buckle through the window and smashed the glass,” LaToya says. “My kids hid in closets from him. He hit me and verbally abused me.” He also stalked LaToya and often threatened violence.

“I was drinking a lot too so I just settled for the abuse,” she admits. “He would always tell me, ‘We are never going to do any better.’”

☒ LaToya also witnessed a lot of street violence while she was living in the projects during her drug-dealing days.

Someone was shot outside her kitchen window while she was looking outside. “And I’ve been in cars where people were being shot up,” she says.

(Pictured: LaToya Merrill, far right, at a family wedding with her husband, Shane, far left).

The downward spiral continued and LaToya’s drinking problem got so bad that her children made comments about her drunken sprees. In 2016, she met a backslidden minister who was also selling drugs and they married. They partied in clubs and continued drinking, but on July 21, 2019, during a trip to a bar, she looked at the bottom of her glass after downing half a bottle of whiskey and decided to change her life.

“I heard a voice say, ‘What are you looking for?’” she says. LaToya admits she knew Jesus “in name only” at that point—mainly because of her grandfather’s Christian influence. She and her husband, Shane, decided to visit a church in Charlotte, North Carolina, and they both made a 180-degree turnaround.

“We walked in the door of that church and sat on the first or second pew,” she says. “And I gave my heart to God that day. I’m still sober and my husband is still sober.”

When I met LaToya last week at her church, I saw no evidence of her troubled past. She was lifting her hands during worship and she was wiping away tears during the altar ministry time. She beamed as she talked with me about her children, who were with her in church that day.

LaToya is certainly not a “statistic” of America’s drug problems now. She has decided to be the answer to the crisis by starting Lighthouse of Destiny, a Christian outreach that supports and rehabilitates underprivileged single mothers. She and her husband hope to buy a property to use as a residential recovery facility.

“LaToya’s heart is unmatched in leadership, loyalty and compassion,” says her pastor, Jason Cook of The Refuge Church. “She is caring for young mothers by blessing them with diapers, wipes, diaper bags, formula and all the essentials she can secure. Her experience as a young mother makes her heart extend to all those who find themselves young, alone and pregnant.”

Only Jesus could write a happy ending to a story that started out so sad as LaToya’s. “I didn’t have anybody telling me there was hope when I was out there in the world,” she says. “Now, I want to help women find that Jesus is the ultimate hope.”

If you’d like to support LaToya’s outreach to unwed mothers, you can donate at [. {eo}](#)

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