

SAINT LEONARD'S MINISTRIES



“I found my life going out of control when I was probably 13. I was the oldest at the time of five children and it was a lot on me.” Born and raised on the Westside of Chicago, Shontell is the oldest of 9 children with a lot on her shoulders at a young age. Shontell’s parents were very strict, perhaps too strict, and Shontell began to act out and rebel. As Shontell shares, “a lot of fights and hanging with the wrong crowd.”

“I thought I had met the love of my life when I was 13, we started dating, he was 16, and I got pregnant. Freshman year of high school I found out I was pregnant. My parents were very strict so I was scared to tell my mom so when she did find out, she wanted me to have an abortion. That’s when the running away started and our relationship started going downhill.” Shontell’s mother was also pregnant at the time with her little brother.

Shontell ran away because she did not want end her pregnancy, she wanted to have her daughter. Her family searched and eventually

found her. Her mother was upset, she didn’t want Shontell to be a mom at 14 years old. Shontell’s grandparents were there for her and she moved in with them while attending Simpson Academy for Young Women, a high school designed to support and empower young mothers.

As Shontell shares, “Things went out of wack even more, because what I thought was my first love turned out to be more than what I thought it would be.” Shontell had a tough pregnancy throughout, had toxemia and had to have a Cesarean section. Shontell recalls waking up from the anesthesia and the doctor telling her, “Miss Lymas, you have a beautiful baby girl!”

Shontell said to the doctor in her foggy anesthesia state, “tell her I love her!!”

Shontell recalls the doctor’s response distinctly-the doctor replied, “she already knows that!” That was June 7, 1986 and Shontell’s memory is so vivid, it is like it happens minutes ago.

Shontell’s daughter was sick and there were many trips to the hospital. Shontell is 15, struggling with her relationship with her mother, the love of her life was not to be, has a baby with health issues and is feeling overwhelmed. Eventually, the Department of Children and Family Services took custody of Shontell’s daughter.

Weeping at night over the pain and agony of not having her daughter, Shontell’s heart ached unimaginably and endlessly. Devastated at losing her daughter, Shontell turned her anger and pain to the streets; that is when the drug use started.

Though Shontell went back to Simpson Academy, the misery of not having her daughter was consuming her. Shontell got pregnant with her second child at 16. Shontell’s mother found out about her drug use and

forced her to stop using drugs completely; no treatment, no support, no understanding of why she was using, just white knuckling through to sobriety. When asked how she just stopped Shontell shares, "I was not going to lose my baby! I was fighting to get my daughter back and I was not going to lose this baby. I was deeply hurt, I cried at night for my baby."

In 1997 Shontell is drug free, has her three children and custody of her nephew. Shontell's sister lives with schizophrenia and was not able care for her son at the time. Unfortunately, Shontell never got custody of her first-born child back from the State of Illinois; Shontell spent over 10 years fighting to get her daughter back. One day, Shontell asked her daughter if she wanted to come home and live with Shontell and her other siblings. Shontell's daughter replied. "Mom, I love you, but I want to stay with Mrs. Williams." Mrs. William's was Shontell's daughter's foster mom at the time. Shontell was deeply hurt but she also understood. As difficult and painful as it was for Shontell, she knew what was best for her daughter and she signed over her parental rights. Shontell's daughter was adopted by her foster mom, Mrs. Williams; for Shontell, the pain of giving up her daughter is with her every day.

Shontell was about 23 and meet an older man she began a relationship with, sadly, he was using heroin and was rarely home. Shontell tells about going out on the streets looking for him, being depressed not knowing where he was, and eventually meeting a woman who introduced her to heroin. Shontell is a smart woman, raised on the west side of Chicago, she had boyfriends who sold drugs, she knows and has seen what substance use does to people. As Shontell said, "that was not going to be me!"

"It started out to be like a weekend thing. When I first did it, I was in my house and the kids were playing, I remember, I wasn't irritated by a thing! I remember joking saying, 'they could have been hanging from the chandelier and I wouldn't have cared.' That's how relaxed I was." That was the hook for Shontell, "the calmness it brought over me, I felt like I could deal with anything."

"I couldn't even tell you when it got out of hand. It went from a weekend thing to a once a day thing, then a twice a day thing. At the end of my addiction I was doing something like 20 some bags a day." This was 2011 and Shontell was deep into her addiction, had built up a tolerance and the drug had changed. It was often "stepped on" with thing other powders to make it less potent and make more money off the drug.

"People think I was exaggerating but I would count! I did 5 when I wake up, then 5 more in the afternoon, then 5 after that, and then 5 more. This was every day at the end of the years of my addiction." Shontell's addiction has her, the sickness had set in and she now finds herself doing things to get the drug Shontell never imagined she would do. Shontell was on a fixed income, her daughter was receiving Social Security and Shontell was on public aid.

Shontell initially borrowed money from a loan shark to support her habit. She minimized it in her mind and decided, "I would rather sell my body before I give up my whole check to the loan shark." In 2001 Shontell when to prison for the first time; she did 61 days. Shontell thought she was going to be on the right track but started being in the same places, hanging with the same people and doing the same stuff all over again.

The one thing Shontell said she always had were her mom and her sister. As Shontell freely admits, when she was in her addiction, she was neglecting her children. That's when her mom and sister decided to move to Indiana and take Shontell's children with them. No one, including Shontell, wanted to lose her children to the Department of Children and Family services. With Shontell's children, mother and sister living in Indiana, Shontell said, "and the years just went by...."

Shontell went back to prison in 2006 for prostitution and decided to have a "master plan, I'm not going to work the streets anymore because they don't pay enough! I'm going sell drugs!! Now I'm selling drugs on the block and I went to the penitentiary 4 time for selling drugs." Shontell actually shares this with an incredulous laugh knowing how the mind of someone in their addiction applies pretzel logic to get what they

want. She knows how ridiculous the “master plan” now sounds.

“It has always been depressing for me. I don’t know what it was about 2011. There was so much going on...and I was just tired. Damn, I’m doing all this dope, hustling, missing my kids, I’m staying in someone else’s house. It was a couple of days before Christmas, I was staying with a friend and renting a room from her, I cried, I cried, I cried. I don’t want to die like that! A couple days after Christmas, December 28 2011 I got popped by the police. I knew that was going to be it, I knew it! This time they sent me down for a whole year. I came home the end 2012.”

“I knew about Grace House and Saint Leonard’s, I wanted to go to Grace House. I did not know Grace House was a part of Saint Leonard’s until I got there. I did the interview and got in. I knew it wasn’t going to be easy. I’m a true believer in God and I knew there were plenty of time I could be dead. Being in those streets I had things done to me and I put myself in situations that I don’t even know how I am sitting here talking to you. I can’t tell you how many time I was in a positions where I could have been killed. I can’t tell you how many times I got out of jail and somebody told me one of my friends had died. I had guns to my head. I got in a car with a man one time, show you how the drug had me, got in the car onetime knowing that the door didn’t open from the inside and I still got my dumb butt in the car! The man pulled a pistol to my head, he did what he did and he let me go. We’re on a dark street, 2 o’clock in the morning, I would have just been there dead.”

“When I got to Grace House my stomach was flipping. I’m going to do the same thing the other 5 time I got out of the penitentiary. I went to recovery homes and everybody else was getting high so I got high too. I just went back to what I was used to. But I remember when I got to Grace House the day after Christmas there was a feeling when I walked through that door. And when I got to my room all this stuff was laid out on my bed because they had gotten all these Christmas donations and they knew I was coming. It was like Christmas, when a child wakes up and everything is under the tree, that’s how it was when I walked upstairs. It wasn’t just

about the things, it was also a feeling of peace, because I was worried about not having anything, and they had everything there for me! It was like God said, ‘okay, what’s your excuse now?’ I knew God was working it out for me.”

“All I wanted to do was be there! Then I started doing right and the doors were opening up for me quick, sometimes I think too quick, but God knew I could handle it.” Shontell had not earned her high school diploma yet and took the test for the Sister Jean Adult High School program here at Saint Leonard’s. She enrolled in the CORE courses to prepare for High School here at the Michael Barlow Center. Shontell is now living at Harvest Commons, working fulltime, and coming to classes Monday through Thursday and met her future husband.

Shontell’s hard work paid off and she graduated with honors from the Sister Jean Adult High School program. Shontell enrolls at Malcolm X College, “scared to death! 44 years old in school with all these 18 and 19 year olds. Those kids became my best friends, those kids helped me! They were there for me and I was there for them.” Shontell found a professor, Mary Lane, and began taking early childhood development classes and loved it. She thought it was like being a parent all over again and applied what she learned with her grandchildren. Shontell was energized by school and earning her education, feeling the potential within her. Shontell graduated with honors in May of 2021 during Covid while working at Grace House as a Case Manager. Shontell’s not done with her education yet! Shontell is looking to return to school and finish her Bachelor’s degree in social work and is grateful classes will be in person.

Shontell has been working at Saint Leonard’s since 2015 in various rolls and when asked why she is still at Saint Leonard’s Ministries Shontell shares, “because this is where it all started for me. When I say give back, I really mean give back. I want our clients to know that they can have success! I think I’m here at Saint Leonard’s to tell my story, like I’m doing now, to share with others that it can be done.”