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She wasn't even a student yet, but when Stacey Borden-Holliday walked into the admissions office at Cambridge College in Central Square, she already had a stack of papers in her hand. They weren't tests or essays, but criminal reports, government documents and work resumes that told the story of a tough life: one spent in and out of jail, battling demons of drug abuse brought on by great personal trauma. Borden-Holliday had promised her father on his deathbed that she would earn her college degree from his alma mater. And she had made a promise to herself to turn her life around. But her previous academics had not been strong, and she feared her background was the type that could keep her from the education she wanted and the brighter future she still dreamed of.

So she approached the situation the only way she could. She laid it all on the table. Literally.

"I spread everything out on the desk," recalls Borden-Holliday. "My CORI report, my father's master's, my resume. I said, 'This is who I was. This is who my dad was. And this is who I am right now. What do I need to do to come to school here?'"

And then she made one more promise. "I said, 'I will be the best that you can teach me to be.'"

She was in.

Borden-Holliday's determination might be exceptional, but her story is not unique. More than 30,000 students have come through Cambridge College classrooms since the school, a non-profit, was founded in 1971. At the time it was among the few American colleges with programs designed especially for working adults – those who needed a degree to advance personally and professionally but faced barriers. The school has since expanded to seven satellite centers, from Memphis, Tennessee to San Juan, Puerto Rico. It remains committed to helping students of great diversity (67 percent of current students are minorities), including those from challenging socioeconomic backgrounds (69 percent receive financial aid), earn an education that circumstance, regrettable choices and simple lack of opportunity may have otherwise denied them.

When Stacey Borden-Holliday was growing up, it was hard to make school a priority. She managed to complete high school at the insistence of her father, a life-long educator, but those days passed by in a blur. Though she kept it a secret at the time, Borden-Holliday was being sexually abused and plied with cocaine, like lollipops, by the time she was nine years old. Drugs “became a crutch,” says Borden-Holliday, who started acting out, skipping school and staying on the streets to sell drugs: anything to be out of the house. By 17 she had been choked and nearly killed during a robbery. She was shot. She was stabbed. Trouble on the streets was easy to find, and going in and out of jail did little to deter her. In fact, it emboldened her. “Once I got a taste of jail and came back on the streets, I was recognized,” she says. For a victim of abuse, validation – even in its most dangerous forms – can be intoxicating. “My two older brothers and little sister, they had a name on the streets. Now I had my

own identity. I had a name for myself. I was accepted. I was received in the neighborhood.”

The years that followed were difficult, with Borden-Holliday “lost” in her addiction throughout most of the ‘90s: going in and out of jail and recovery programs. Eventually she realized time was running out to pull her life together. “The rock bottom I hit was prison,” says Borden-Holliday, who served three years for crimes related to fraud and identity theft. During her time in prison, she would speak to her parents on the phone; over time she noticed small changes in their voices, small lapses in memory. They were getting older. And she wasn’t there with him. “I remember calling home once, and my mother telling me, ‘I’m waiting for you,’” she recalls. It was another way of saying time is growing short. “I just looked around the place. Here were these people walking around in blue uniforms, holding keys. I was trapped in this little room. I thought: this can’t be real. This can’t be my real life.”

Something clicked. Something different. Borden-Holliday signed up for the Correctional Recovery Academy and began to break apart, brick by brick, the issues that had imprisoned her in a self-defeating cycle. She confronted the realities of the crimes she had committed – and the abuse that had been committed against her. She tackled her substance abuse. And she developed confidence and validation in a new, healthy way: after graduating from the CRA she began mentoring other women in the program. Sharing her story was no longer painful, but empowering. “They felt what I was saying, and they understood that I had something to offer,” says Borden-Holliday. “They’d

say, ‘Wow, Stacey. You’re kind of powerful!’ I was helping people save their own lives.”

But she still had to save her own. After her release, Stacey-Borden cared for her then-ailing parents in their final years. She developed a more intimate bond with her mother – one that, she says, was missing when she was growing up. They shared their secrets. “It was the most amazing experience,” she says. “I got everything I didn’t get as a child, as an adult. And I was able to give her the love that she hadn’t had as a child.”

And for the first time, her parents truly acknowledged the abuse that had set in motion her darkest, most challenging years. “It was so comforting to have them acknowledge that pain,” says Borden-Holliday, who now glows with praise about her parents. Her mother was stern, but kept the best home she could, she says; and her father was a righteous man. He had taken his own experiences with alcoholism and channeled them into years as a counselor for substance abusers. But Borden-Holliday says the most important person he was able to impact, though, was his daughter.

“He never judged me, he never gave up on me and he loved me until I learned to love myself.”



So she follows in his footsteps. Next year, as one of Cambridge College's graduates she'll receive her degree in Human Services, where she also works in the Student Affairs department: one of the work-study opportunities provided by the college as ways to help students make their way through the expensive education process.(Outside employment can be tough for populations that are affected by marks on their CORI report.)

When Borden-Holliday imagines herself in the years ahead, things begin to come into focus. She wants to pursue a master's degree, and dedicate herself to helping other women impacted by abuse, addiction and prison time by going into family mental health counseling. Along the way, she invites opportunities to share her own inspiring story. She has already offered a speech at Cambridge College's Scholarship Celebration, and has been invited as a guest speaker at other area schools. She lives to tell

a story she once kept secret, a drastic change she attributes to her education.

“My learning experience has been gratifying in ways I never dreamed possible,” says Borden-Holliday. “No one at the college passed judgment on me. The nurturing, the discipline – it has been amazing.”