

A day of gratitude and giving thanks

It was Thanksgiving Day 2015.

Katlyn Soltys crawled her way out of the Santa Ana riverbed, where she had been living near the corner of Hamilton Avenue and Brookhurst Street, and into Costa Mesa's Lighthouse Church of the Nazarene.

She was approaching her 26th birthday and had already racked up 14 brutal years of addiction to alcohol, heroin, crack and meth. A Michigan native, she had let drugs destroy her relationship with her family.

But it was on this day of gratitude and giving thanks that she realized she needed to end the cycle of destruction.

So a friend took her to the Lighthouse for breakfast where she met church staff members Tim Brown and Ronnie Steen. She instantly felt love at the church. She thought that this is where she needed to be to get her life back

"It was the kindness I felt from everyone," she said. "It had been a real long time since anyone had been that nice to me."

But Brown and Steen had bad news for her. They told her the Lighthouse was a men's only facility. She left the church dejected and sad but after wandering the streets of Costa Mesa, she returned later that day with this message for the church staff.

"I looked at Tim and said, 'I'm going to die if you don't let me live here,'" Soltys said.

So the two Lighthouse workers prayed about it and decided to let her stay. They set up a little cot in their sanctuary

kitchen area where Soltys stayed and did whatever work they wanted her to do. She cooked and attended their meetings.

"I'm just thankful that during this time in my life their doors were open for me," she said. "I felt like I was a person to them. Even though I was a woman in a men's facility I felt just as equal. My heart felt full."

For Lighthouse Church Pastor Phil Eyskens, who works daily with the city's Network for Homeless Solutions, Soltys is just one of many his ministry touches on a regular basis.

"When I was first assigned as pastor of the Lighthouse over seven years ago, I soon came to the conclusion that this unique church was more than just a church, but it was also a mission," said Pastor Phil Eyskens. "Katlyn's story is one of the many success stories we have realized here at the Lighthouse, as we strive to offer a hand-up approach in this rubber-meets-the-road ministry. Go Katlyn, go!"

Through Soltys' connection at the Lighthouse, she met another church worker, Lindah Miles, who helped her get into a sober living facility in Palm Springs. That ended up being a life-changing and lifesaving moment and Soltys has never looked back.

After spending 90 days in the Palm Springs rehab facility, Soltys moved into another one in Garden Grove called Gabe's Home, named after the son of Pastor Joe Furey of His Place Church in Westminster who died of a heroin overdose. She now lives in a Huntington Beach apartment with her fiancé, who also got clean after years of addiction.

Soltys ended up in California at the age of 23 after her mom kicked her out of their Michigan home and sent her to a rehab facility in Temecula that she eventually also got kicked out of.

She spent three years bouncing in and out of rehab homes and

living in Oceanside, San Diego and Costa Mesa before giving up drugs for good on that Thanksgiving Day in 2015. But for someone who had spent more than a decade hooked on alcohol and drugs, the pathway to sober living and a life off of the streets was more difficult than imagined.

“I was kind of shell shocked,” she said. “The readjustment of coming back and having a roof over my head was really uncomfortable. I didn’t know what to do. You don’t get that many success stories from homelessness. What is life after homelessness? I felt that overwhelming feeling.”

Then she got busy. She got a sponsor through Alcoholics Anonymous. She got a job at a law firm in Irvine and would take the bus every morning to work at 5 a.m. She said even though it was long hours, the job gave her a safe place to be every day and she was grateful to have the opportunity.

She worked there a year and a half and then her life changed again. Her son Levi was born.

“I look at Levi now and I think how could I ever see a life without him,” she said. “I love my family and I realize how much love my family has for me and I couldn’t imagine ever going back.”

Indeed, after years of emotional trauma, after years of distrust and anger, she has mended fences with her family and now speaks to her mother every day and says her mom is her best friend. She credits that to her sobriety and how former addicts look back at the damage they have done and instead become what she called “other-centered.”

“I can’t imagine what I put my family through,” she said. “If I have a bad day and I ever think about getting high, I think about my family and I wouldn’t want to put them through that again.”

Today, Soltys feels the drive to help others who are in the

shoes she once was in. She says the best part of her sobriety is that she can be a sponsor in AA. She helps women go through the 12 steps. She hopes that someday the Lighthouse Church will have a place for women to seek help from addiction and she also hopes someday to make a career out of helping others.

"It helps me to help them," she said. "They are helping me more than I'm helping them and they don't even know that. I've done a lot of fun things in sobriety."

Things continue to look brighter and brighter for her. After eight years without a driver's license she got hers reinstated this past February, and the next day her fiance's boss gave her a car.

She attributes all of this to a higher power.

"My story is much related to God," she said. "I didn't plan to stop using that day. I didn't plan to leave the riverbed that day. I really enjoyed being homeless. I really enjoyed using drugs. I'm telling you it was God."