

Michelle Payette

A Beacon of Light



COVER STORY

By Jenna Caputo

Photos by MarkBolles.com

In a world that has become increasingly more cynical, stories of redemption are often viewed as only subjects of holiday Hallmark or Lifetime movies and not something that happens in real life. But Michelle Payette, minister at Beacon of Light, proves that these stories do indeed happen everyday.

Originally from Chicago, Illinois, Michelle was the third of three daughters. Born 10 years later than her middle sister, Michelle was supposed to be the child that would save her parents' marriage. They thought they would be having a boy and instead she was a girl. Michelle felt like a failure from the start. Her family moved to Saratoga Springs when she was five years old. She had a tough childhood and much of her family's past story was kept from her until many years later. She didn't realize that this veiled history was beginning to repeat itself in her own life story.

On the surface, it looked like her life had turned out great. She was a successful businesswoman with a big house on a beautiful piece of property, a nice car and two wonderful kids. It seemed like she had it all. In reality, she felt an immense pressure to "perform" to uphold her status and continue providing for her children. She wanted to give her kids a good life and keep them out of trouble. She wanted to protect them from some of the hardships she went through as a child. She didn't realize at the time that the choices she made to protect them were what would end up hurting them in the end.

CLIFTON PARK *Neighbors*

As a person that always felt like she had to live up to other people's expectations, she had a hard time saying no. Her thoughts became twisted and her boundaries blurred. Things began to spiral. She didn't question the unethical activities that she saw around her. Although she thought twice about it, she made the choice to begin cooking the books at the office for herself, "borrowing" money and then lying to cover it up. "I lost my mind," she remembers. "I was just acting, I wasn't thinking. I was just getting through the minute and there had never been any accountability in my life."

It all started becoming too much for her and she began to feel like she couldn't function anymore. She knew she didn't want to continue doing what she was doing but she couldn't figure out how to stop. One day her son was invited to church and she decided to join him at Grace Chapel of Clifton Park. Something felt right and she continued to go. Eventually, following an audit, Michelle was arrested for stealing. She took a plea bargain and went to prison. It was there that she finally told the full truth. "It was the beginning of a huge change for me. 'The truth will set you free.' It really did. It was a chance for me to realize I could admit what I did and move on from it," she says.

It was in prison when she began to get some clarity on her own life and how she would find her redemption and reconcile with her family to piece their lives back together once she got out. She wanted to own what she had done wrong without pointing fingers, realizing that history repeats itself. "Criminals aren't born bad people. We're all born innocent. It changed my life in prison. People I would have crossed the street from before are now the people I seek out and want to be around because they are good people. It's just generational dysfunction. One learned behavior and one bad choice at a time; one compromise and the next compromise and then before you know it, you're in so deep you don't know when to stop. How do you control your own personal dysfunction? For me, it was Jesus."

After finally being able to tell the truth and knowing that she was doing something to start making her life right again, Michelle felt joyful for the first time in her life. A weight had been lifted off of her and she describes herself as that annoying person that walked around happy all the time. "I had hope for the first time in my life that I could do something right," she says. While in prison she finally received help and counseling for her issues stemming from her childhood. She also always looked for positive ways to keep herself busy.

She was in a unit with 64 other women, all in bunk beds separated by partial walls like bathroom stalls. The lights never went off and there was always trouble. Michelle was scared and just wanted to find a way to keep herself out of trouble. "I've never felt so unsafe but I also wouldn't change it for anything," she explains. "I met the best people I ever met there and I'm better because of it."



Michelle with April Harden

She took courses to become a certified legal research aid. She also volunteered to clean the prison chapel since it was a place that brought her peace. It was during one of those cleaning sessions that she found a closet full of Christian books and videos, including *Strong's Bible Concordance*. Apparently these materials were stored there after the prison's Protestant chaplain had passed away. Michelle asked if she could make a Christian library out of the unused space and created a useable, organized and cataloged Christian space with the help of other inmates and citizen volunteers.

They were drawn to the Concordance and would look up words that related to whatever issues they were feeling that day – anxiety, broken heart, etc. The book led them to the answers to their questions within the Bible and soon they had created their own Bible study group. "It was truly Holy Spirit led," Michelle says, since they were teaching each other and finding their own way as they went along. The group started with about 4-5 people and quickly grew



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into 50 people within the year. Volunteers brought in Bible studies to help them out. They would start a session with the "Bible Game." It began by asking each other what was bothering them that day. They would look it up, read the related passage, close their eyes and pray about it to see what would come to their minds. Then they talked about it. Michelle calls it a humbling, real experience and it stayed with her ever since.

While in prison she also helped some of the women fill out applications for the Angel Tree program. Angel Tree helps connect parents in prison with their children through the delivery of Christmas gifts. The parent picks out what they would like to give their child and church volunteers purchase and deliver the gifts, letting the children know that it was from their parent. After the first time she was helping the women with their applications, she found them ripped up in the garbage and was incensed. She wrote letters to people she thought could help make sure that this program was followed. The Angel Tree program has been an important part of her life from that day on.

To this day she has never stopped wanting to help prisoners. "I realized that we had a lot in common, but I had a tremendous advantage in life," she explains. "I was a smart, upper middle class, white woman with leadership skills. I could read, I could write, and I could reason temperately." It may have started with a closet full of books, but has now grown into a full-blown ministry.

After she was released from prison, she had to find a way to get her life back together. Her family was devastated and ashamed. She had no place to live and couldn't get anyone to hire her for a full-time job. She took a couple of part-time jobs and worked for herself to try to get her through. Luckily, a family in Rexford decided to take a chance on her and rented her an apartment so she could live with her son again (her daughter had graduated college and was employed and living on her own by this time).

She never tried to hide her past. She is a self-described open book because as she says, "You gotta own your responsibility. We put ourselves there. 99% of those in prison did do it. If we don't admit that, our children will follow and it will never get better." She found that every place she went, even getting a haircut or out to dinner, she would hear stories from other people with family members in prison. "So many families in our community are affected by incarceration but no one talks about it. There is so much shame. It's like mold," she says. "It grows in a damp, dark place. If you don't address it, it is just going to grow and fester."

Michelle wanted to help stop the cycle of generational dysfunction and to work with families in her own area to help ease the burden of having a family member in prison. Her "a-ha moment" came when she was delivering a gift



Michelle visiting with the Reynolds family

for Angel Tree to a young girl in Cohoes. "I asked how long it had been since she'd seen her father. When they responded that it had been nearly 10 years, I felt certain I had misheard, but I hadn't! When I asked why, the response was a simple, 'because we don't have a car.' Well, I had a car and before you knew it, I was driving her to see her father." It was the start. Named after her stay at Beacon Correction Facility, Beacon of Light Ministry was born. Their services are different for each family, depending on the family's individual needs. Now a commissioned minister, Michelle oversees Beacon's many programs including a mentoring program, visitation assistance, Christian camps and retreats, job assistance, a pen pal program and the Angel Tree program, with plans for more as this community-based organization continues to grow.

Remembering her experience with the ripped up Angel Tree applications, Michelle has devoted a significant portion of her life to Angel Tree as well. She was so grateful to the Grace Chapel Church for standing by and helping her family while she was incarcerated, she immediately became their Angel Tree Coordinator upon her release. She then became an area coordinator one year later, serving 10 counties in upstate NY. This past fall, she received a full-time job with Angel Tree, now covering Washington DC, Virginia, West Virginia, Delaware and Maryland.

She is happy to finally be a fully employed, tax-paying citizen again, but is even more happy to be able to give back with programs that are so important to her. She takes responsibility for what she did and wants to serve her family, community and faith in any way she can. She's been given a new start and is going to make the most of it. She views these last few years as a test of her perseverance and faith and knows that she is only human and will make mistakes, but it is about the choices she makes – the

conscious decisions to do right from this point forward that matters. She now views her life not as being about her, but about God and how she can help other people not make the same mistakes. It's about what she can do to make her community and humanity better.

Michelle has since paid back nearly everyone she monetarily owed and she continues to pay back to the community through her work. "I'm never gonna get over it. It changed who I am," she says. "My character, my fiber from within is 100% different. I'm changed!" She knows you can't keep living in your past and she wants to leave an impact on the world and a good legacy for her children. "I want to make a lasting difference in as many lives as I can by being honest and transparent about our dysfunctions in pain so we can get beyond it and leave a positive legacy for our future children and grandchildren." She feels that her work with youth is the most important in trying to stop the cycle. "You need to catch it in the beginning so you can stop it. Shine the light on it to bring it all out into the open and deal with it. If you don't, it festers."

She wants everyone to remember that there is help out there and that God takes every bad thing and uses it for His good. She encourages community members to remember to be good to each other – it's not about the church, it's the people and what we can do for each other. "Life and death are in the tongue," she says. "You can speak words that are

positive or words that cause discouragement and moments of defeat."

She also reminds us to not blame the families of the incarcerated, remembering how her family had no idea what she was doing. "It's not their fault. These families are innocent victims as well. They didn't commit the crime yet they are punished right along with the inmate and ostracized by our community many times. You don't cure dysfunction with hate – you cure it with love. It is truly freeing to not have anything you're hiding and not feel shameful. Have a heart of compassion and understand they are innocent victims."

There are several ways to volunteer here in Clifton Park. Beacon of Light has many volunteer needs, including Christians that are willing to be pen pals to those that are incarcerated (there is a need especially for male pen pals). For more information about the pen pal program or any of the other volunteer opportunities through Beacon of Light, visit www.beaconoflightny.org.

For more information on how you or your church can help with the Angel Tree program this Christmas, visit www.angeltree.org. ■

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