

Self-Advocate of the Month December 1, 2016



Keya Curtis
Project CARE
Self-Advocate of the
Month

Compassionate, perceptive, helpful, kind-hearted and witty are the words I've used to describe one of Project CARE's Self-Advocates, Keya Curtis. After meeting with her for this interview though, I definitely need to add a new word: *resilient*.

Keya has been very involved in Project CARE's mission since she first agreed to work with our collaborative. She is passionate about helping others and sharing her strength with survivors.

Before our interview began, Keya told me that she wanted me to share *everything* so that others will "really know they can become a success story too." She then grabbed my pen and said, "Girl, give me that paper (*the consent form to share her experience*) and let's do this."

Keya endured severe trauma as a child when, at the age of 5, she was raped by a friend of the family. She attributes much of her subsequent experiences to that trauma and says she still struggles with the memories sometimes.

With her knowing smile, she looks at the tears forming in my eyes and says, "but I am a success story now, Girl."

One of five children, Keya grew up in a family where things with her parents were frequently unstable. She struggled with undiagnosed mental health issues and turned to drugs as a means to self-medicate. She candidly tells me: "I do have disabilities and I recognize them, but they don't have me."

Keya is open and honest during our interview; sharing stories about being hit in the head with a hammer by a man she thought loved her and being choked with a belt by another man who tried to bribe her with drugs to "keep my mouth shut."

"I started to use drugs all the time after that." Keya discusses the terror of being in "dark places" so "I could do what I needed to do, to get the drugs." She talks about feelings of desperation that led to prostitution and jail.

Smiling, but with tears in her eyes, she tells me "I

don't even litter now, because you know they can get you for that too, Girl."

Keya has three sons and two sisters that she is building stronger relationships with. "Look, I lost my kids, I went to jail, and I got abused and beaten and addicted to drugs. I've had a rough life. But I'm out there being an advocate now and I'm a success story."

Keya says that one woman, Miss Mary, was "my saving grace." Keya met Miss Mary when she lived in a group home after the "State of Ohio started telling me what to do." She laughed and then said, "Nah, actually, the state never gave up on me. They just kept sending me case workers and people to try to help me. I kept running, but one day I got tired of running."

That is when she began to get sober. She says Miss Mary brought joy into her life. "She showed me how to cook, to put on makeup and how to feel good about myself." Keya pauses a moment, catches her breath and looks at me with her big, beautiful and sparkling eyes, and says, "Miss Mary made sure our house was a home. She showed me she cared."

Keya relays a memory of when Miss Mary once told her that she would be able to help others someday, and that "I would be someone else's success story."

Keya says she knows she can make it through anything now because "I am still standing." She offers advice to others by saying, "when you are going through something, whoever you believe in, pray to them, have patience, reach out to others and accept the help they can give you. I am one of the ones that gets to give the help now."

When asked why she enjoys being a Self-Advocate for Project CARE, Keya says "I get to give back what others gave to me. I get to help be a voice for people who don't know they have one."

We end the interview with a huge hug as we simultaneously say, "I love you, Girl."

Keya, you are definitely a success.

Submitted by Holly Watson, Project CARE Manager



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Having courage does not mean we are unafraid. Having courage and showing courage means we face our fears. We are able to say, I have fallen, but I will get up.

~Maya Angelou