

GLENN KOONS CERTIFIED PEER SPECIALIST SCHOLARSHIP

WINNER: 2017



The Pennsylvania Mental Health Consumers' Association and the Mental Health Association in Pennsylvania are pleased to announce **Dontae George Myers** as the recipient of the *2017 Glenn Koons Scholarship*. The funds associated with this scholarship will cover the registration cost for his Certified Peer Specialist training this fall.

Thank you to the Mental Health Association in Pennsylvania for sharing Dontae's story with us.

Recovery Through Peer Support: Meet Dontae George Myers, Glenn Koons Scholarship Recipient

Cambria County resident, Dontae George Myers was a young 29 when he lost his mom. Still grieving over his parents' separation years before and emotionally raw from five years of caring for his ill mother, Dontae went into a tailspin after her death. He was hospitalized and then spent time in rehab for co-occurring disorder.

Although Dontae came out of the hospital and rehab with tools to manage his mental health, he credits peer support and the community he found at the Peer Empowerment Network (PEN) Drop In Center in Johnstown, PA, with setting him on a solid path to recovery and leading him to pursue certification in peer support.

Dontae says his recovery journey “has been a big one.” The recipient of this year’s Glenn Koons Scholarship for Peer Support, Dontae also recently received the Value Behavioral Health, Leadership in Recovery Award for Cambria County. In reflecting how far he’s traveled since his mother’s passing, he says, “After the loss of my Mom, I had no direction. I started going to the PEN Drop In for what I could get, now I go for what I can give. We asked Dontae to share some of his recovery story and journey to peer support:

Rising After Collapse...

I’m barely 35 years old. I was born in Johnstown, Pennsylvania and lived there until I was about seven years old. Then my family moved to Greensburg.

When I was a junior in high school, my parents separated. That’s when my problems started. We were very family oriented, a close-knit family. I’d lived with anxiety and depression, but when my mom and dad separated, I had a breakdown, smoking weed and hanging with people I shouldn’t have. I almost didn’t graduate from high school. I was mad at my dad for leaving his family, at my parents for separating.

But I graduated and went to college for three years. I was a year away from earning my degree when my mom became sick. She was bedridden, so I left school to be her primary caregiver. I had family and medical help, but I am the oldest child and was responsible for keeping it all going, and it got to the point where she needed around-the-clock care, and I stopped sleeping enough. I was angry at having to leave college, still mad at my dad, and mentally beat from worrying about and caring for my mom.

My mom passed in May 2012, and my world collapsed. I went to a psych ward and, after that, started using opioids. For a good year and a half after she died, I was here physically but not mentally.

I had moved back to Johnstown with my mom before she passed. After she died, I found the PEN Drop In Center. I started going there and began coming back to life. I didn't talk for a long time. I was in shock. But then I met someone at the Center who had recently lost her mom. She understood what I was going through and her support and understanding helped me become less isolated and quiet. I started talking and sharing and getting involved. I eventually became secretary of the Cambria County Community Support Program that meets at the PEN Center.

It was during this period of my life that I connected with peer support.

FINDING PEER SUPPORT...

When it comes to peers, they have the lived experience. I'd rather talk to someone who has the lived experience than someone who just has book experience.

My peer support specialist, Jason Riligio, inspired me to pursue peer support training and told me about the Glenn Koons Scholarship. I have the lived experience, and I'm not biased. I care, and I'm very realistic.

I'm humbled and blessed to be able to help others because of all the things that I went through in life at a young age. I have a lot of experience in certain areas like grief, drugs and alcohol, mental health. And I'm still young so I have a lot to offer.

TRAVELING LIFE'S JOURNEY...

I'm excited about what is to come. I am proud of all that I have accomplished over the past several years. I have taken control of my mental health and become active in many causes that are important to me. I have participated in the community peace walks, advocating for unity in my city. I have worked with several agencies and assisted with fundraising efforts to raise awareness of addiction and its effects on families and communities.

Until recently, I volunteered at the PEN Drop In Center through AmeriCorp. But I just completed my three-week peer support training at Cranberry, with support from the Glenn Koons Scholarship, and will be working with adults at the Alternative Community Resource Program. I'm

also certified as a WRAP (Wellness Action Recovery Plan) facilitator, so now I can teach WRAP.

As for my family, my brother and I are very close, and I've come to terms with my dad. I have to forgive him within my heart, even without him justifying or apologizing his actions. Our relationship is back. Why keep the bitterness in my heart? I only have one dad and the anger only holds me back.

In the future, I want to become a motivational speaker and travel and tell my story to advocate for others and mental health awareness. And I'm going back to school part-time in the fall. I only have one year left, and my goal is to earn a Bachelor's of Arts in Criminal Justice.