

## **Former addicts, rehabilitated inmates, help to shatter substance use and addiction myths**

The Alliance for Marijuana Prevention Coalition (AMP), a subcommittee of the Coalition for a Drug Free Muskegon (DFC), is hosting their seventh forum, Shattering the Myths. The forum will take place on Wednesday, September 18<sup>th</sup> from 8 to 9 a.m. and again from 10 to 11 a.m. at the Reeths Puffer High School. Over 600 high school students will join Fresh Coast Alliance and members of AMP in the auditorium to hear real life stories of individuals that made negative choices, which led them down a road of substance use addiction and eventually incarceration.

Nate Johnson, Re-entry and Outreach Director at Fresh Coast Alliance, states, "The biggest myth of all is that the negative choices we make today will not affect us later on in life. At this forum, we can attest to that. We are the result of the choices we made when we were younger, and how those choices have affected us today. In my experience, dabbling with drugs and then selling drugs up until the time I went to prison, I have never met a crack addict, heroin addict, meth addict--whatever addict--that didn't first start smoking marijuana," stated Johnson.

The Shattering the Myths forums first took place at Muskegon Community College; and due to the positive response the forums have had, the forum has been expanded to other schools in Muskegon, such as North Muskegon High School, Orchard View High School, Fruitport High School, Muskegon High School, and Muskegon Heights High School.

"Choices, good or bad, we still have to deal with the consequences," states Lt. Brandon Poel of Norton Shores Police Department, and Chair of the Alliance for Marijuana Prevention Coalition (AMP). These speakers have all made negative choices and continue having to deal with these consequences. Their stories are real, they are "edge-of-your-seat" riveting, and they involve fellow students who graduated from Muskegon County school districts, including Reeths-Puffer. Now, they are on a mission to give back to their community in a positive way. Help us teach your children to make positive life choices."

AMP is encouraging parents to talk to their kids about substance use. "The sooner parents talk to their kids about drug use, the better," said Lt Brandon Poel, Chair of the Alliance for Marijuana Prevention Coalition. "Parents who don't know how to start the conversation can visit [talksooner.org](http://talksooner.org), or download the free app filled with tips and resources," he added.

Meanwhile, in the 2018 MiPHY survey of Muskegon County teens, only 41% think marijuana use is risky; 48% report it would be easy or very easy to get marijuana; and 16% say they have used marijuana in the past 30 days. Alcohol, Tobacco, and Marijuana remain to be the highest used substances among youth, and 12 to 13 years old are when students say they are trying or experimenting with substances. MiPHY is short for the Michigan Profile for Healthy Youth survey issued by the Michigan Department of Education.

For answers to questions about this event, please contact the Health Project, Community Benefit Ministry of Mercy Health, at 231-672-3201. For help with a substance abuse problem, please contact HealthWest at 231-720-3200.

Shattering the Myths is grant funded by a local health prevention coalition called AMP – Alliance for Marijuana Prevention through the Lakeshore Regional Entity. It is offered in cooperation with Fresh Coast Alliance, Muskegon Area Intermediate School District, Muskegon County Parole Office, Muskegon County Prosecutor’s Office, Muskegon County Sherriff’s Office, Muskegon Township Police Department, Norton Shores Police Department, Reeths-Puffer Public Schools, and Public Health - Muskegon County.

**Meet the speakers:**



Nate Johnson is a Muskegon native, born and raised. He spent the majority of his youth making bad decisions that kept him in and out of lock up during his teen years, ultimately landing him in the state prison at the age of 19 to serve a 12.5-year prison sentence for robbery and drug related offenses. After his release, he began working with men and women coming home from incarceration, and those coming out of addiction. He is the co-founder of Fresh Coast Alliance here in Muskegon, which offers a holistic approach to ReEntry and Recovery. Nate believes that part of his mission in life is to help clean up what he helped mess up.



Jessica Blanchard was born and raised in Muskegon MI, graduating from Orchard View High School with honors. She played basketball, volleyball and soccer, was Student Artist of the year, winning an honorable mention in Student Showcase while dual enrolled in college classes at Muskegon Community College. Jessica grew up in a single parent home after her father had committed suicide. She was exposed to drugs and alcohol at 14 and by her senior year was heavy into party drugs. Moving to New Orleans at 18, she became a full-blown alcoholic. Returning to Michigan to start a family in 2003, she still struggled with addiction, but maintained enough to build a life, go back to college, and buy a home. When her mother died, her daughter's father committed suicide and her boyfriend became abusive, suffering from his own drug addiction, she fell off the deep end. Drinking turned into a heroin addiction that led to her breaking the law and 7 months of incarceration. This was the turning point in her life, where thru God and resources like AA, Read Muskegon, Fresh Coast Alliance and Smart Recovery she was able to break free from the bondage of drugs. She continues on this journey today in hopes of becoming a recovery coach herself, and helping others beat the odds of addiction.



Mary Ware was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri. Her addiction started 7 years ago when she was prescribed opiate pain medication for an injury to her back. Within 4 years of being prescribed opiates, she had transformed from successful young wife and mother with a great career, to completely addicted to street drugs ignoring her responsibilities. She lost her home and decided to move to Muskegon, Michigan to seek help from her in-laws in the fall of 2016. Shortly after moving to Muskegon her addiction worsened despite the help being offered, she left her family to do heroin on the streets of Muskegon. Faced with a life or death situation she chose to take advantage of the help offered to her from Fresh Coast Alliance. Their unique approach to recovery was just what she needed! She has remained clean for 9 months now! She has since completely restored

her marriage and family, and is just a few weeks away from receiving her certification as a Recovery Coach where she hopes to help deliver those from a life of addiction that she once lived!



Born and raised in Muskegon, Kristi knows what it means to overcome stereotypical labels society deems appropriate when uneducated about children raised in homes with abuse. Living with an alcoholic father and an enabling mother, Kristi took on many roles to find her place in similar environments as hers, with an emotionally absent parent. Her father eventually quit drinking, but she continued her erratic lifestyle, eventually being charged with felony operating while intoxicated (OWI), resulting in a four-month confinement in Muskegon County Jail. Today, Kristi is married, a mother of three daughters, and maintains a life in recovery with support from mentors gained through voluntary programming participation at Fresh Coast Alliance and The 490 Bakery. Kristi is now employed as a Life Recovery Coach with

Fresh Coast Alliance and is currently pursuing a Master of Social Work degree.



Stephen was born and raised here in the Muskegon area. He went to Moon Elementary and Reeths Puffer Elementary. He graduated from Reeths-Puffer High School in 2001. Stephen spent his teenage years about 5 blocks west of Reeths Puffer High School. He graduated from Reeths Puffer with a Full-Ride Scholarship to Western Michigan Univ. Shortly before graduation, Stephen was charged with his 1st Felony for Larceny from a Building. He was kicked out of Western Mich. Univ. 18 months later for suspicion of drug trafficking. After that, Stephen worked in various restaurants here in the Muskegon area for about 12 years. During this time, he continued to use drugs and make poor choices. The result of Stephen's behavior was many trips to the County Jail and eventually the Michigan Dept. of Corrections. Stephen now

works as a Recovery Coach for a Federally Qualified Health Care Center here in Muskegon County. He works with men and women dealing with Substance Use Disorder navigate the world of Recovery.



Kyle Johnson lives in Muskegon Mi, Kyle was born in Muskegon and raised in Chicago. Kyle graduated from high school in 2004. Post High School Kyle made a poor choice to start using drugs and alcohol that led him down a dark path. Thankfully Kyle was able to turn his life around with the help of his loved ones. Kyle now has a great job in Grand Rapids and is seeking to become a recovery coach to help others who struggled like he once did.