

Author inspires youth with story of pain, trauma and redemption

Shawna Arnold's scars run deep, but there's no wound her faith hasn't healed.

Her life was once focused on the pain of addiction, abuse and abortion. But now God has turned her trauma into a mission to help others.

Over the last 10 years, Arnold has spoken at Catholic high schools, youth groups and churches across Saskatchewan, appeared on the Catholic television network EWTN, and published her life story in a book.

"I have so much strength now," said Arnold, 44. "It feels like a weight has been lifted off of me. God is just constantly working miracles in my life. I've been through so much rejection, guilt and shame. I know how it feels to be unwanted and I thought I was destined for that life. But when I look back now, I can't believe I ever was that person."



Ryan Leblanc

Her redemptive story from a scarred childhood to rebuilding her life as a Catholic has already inspired thousands.

"What I appreciate is that her story is not just the grim details of her difficult life, but it's about how God was able to find her and speak to her heart," said Ryan Leblanc, a religion teacher and lay chaplain at E.D. Feehan Catholic High School in Saskatoon. Arnold speaks to his Grade 10 religion classes each semester.

“A lot of our students may be struggling with mental illness, trauma or addictions, and the classroom is not the easiest place to explore that,” Leblanc said.

“With Shawna, the students not only appreciate her willingness and compassion for sharing the difficult things she experienced; she also shows them what hope looks like. And it’s really explicit that the hope is in God and in His healing power.”

Born in Humboldt, Sask., Arnold had the odds stacked against her. Her biological father abandoned the family. Her mother was addicted to prescription pills and often lashed out with emotional and physical abuse.

Arnold was raised Catholic, but she had little faith.

“I grew up with all this garbage going on around me. It has a way of consuming you,” she said. “I totally distanced myself from religion. With all the suffering and the negativity I was going through – I couldn’t understand if there was a God.”

As a teenager, her life spiraled out of control. She became addicted to alcohol, wound up in a juvenile detention centre three times, and was encouraged by her mother to have an abortion at 18. It was a decision Arnold would spend her life regretting.

When she was 20, her mother died of an overdose and Arnold became pregnant for a second time. Feeling distraught and alone, she decided to have the child and raised him as a single parent.



Shawna Arnold

In 2004, she packed up her things and moved to Prince Albert, looking for a fresh start.

"I was just at the bottom of the barrel at that time," Arnold said. "I had this sense there must be more to life than what I'm living. At that same time, I started to get this desire to go to church. I never knew you could know God or have a relationship with Him. But I figured, what else should I do?"

Arnold began attending Mass at St. Joseph's Parish in Prince Albert, where she was invited to a retreat that would forever change her.

"The man putting on the retreat said 'Imagine God is before you,'" Arnold recalled. "And all of a sudden ... I heard words. They were audible. They could've been within my heart, but I heard a voice say to me 'I am your father, and I love you.' I got a rush of excitement and I was in tears.

"I prayed that God would heal me, help me, love me – all of these things," she continued. "All of this was going through my head and I felt this love and peace come over me; it was so strong. No one can tell me God isn't real, because my heart was touched so deep that night."

Soon weekly adoration, routine confession and daily prayer became part of Arnold's life. Her faith gave her the ability to work through many of her past trauma and mistakes.

"That was the start of my transformation," she said. "When you've been abused your whole life, you're not going to be instantly healed. So I took this journey with God. I just began to pour out all of my garbage at the feet of Jesus.

"It was only through God making His presence known to me and going to the sacraments that I actually learned to love myself and overcome all I had experienced."

It's a recovery that has stirred the hearts of many. In 2016 Arnold wrote an autobiography, *From Darkness Into Light: Finding My Way to the Father's Merciful Love*. The book has sold more than 1,000 copies and led to her appearance on EWTN last year.

Arnold is most passionate about speaking with young people. Many of the difficulties she faced – from growing up without a father to struggling with addiction – are familiar to many. It makes her journey all the more pertinent, and it's why she wants to expand her speaking engagements to Catholic schools and youth groups beyond Saskatchewan.

"My heart is for anyone hurting, but especially for troubled kids. I feel for them tremendously," she said. "Sometimes in a classroom of 30 maybe only four or five are practising Catholics. So one thing I always hear from young people who don't really know God is that my story made them realize there must be

something out there.

“Above all, I want them to know that God is real and that God can heal them.”

She is now in the beginning stages of planning speaking dates in other parts of Canada, as well as the U.S. For more information, email Arnold at shawnaa_respectforlife@hotmail.com or visit her blog.