

Jodi Peterson Stigers

Easing the Pain of Homelessness



Jodi Peterson Stigers believes that when we go through hardships, the story isn't about the hardship itself but rather what happens as a result of it.

Jodi says it was because she lost her dad to mental health that she learned how to care for those who are experiencing homelessness. Her dad's illness inspired her sister to become a part of a nonprofit called the Depressed Cake Shop™, which aims to lift the stigma of mental illness in an artistic way. Although they took different paths, they are creating change to address the same issue.

“On the other side of difficulty, a great woman bursts into real change,” Jodi says. “Some people are broken down by challenges, hardship, and being abandoned. The ones who aren't broken take their life lessons and build forward. I have seen so many women—and some men—demonstrate great strength and develop tools because of something terrible that happened.

“When I found a way to do something with those lessons, it freed me up in a powerful way. I took the lessons I learned and began to apply them to people who are still alive and to fight for change. I couldn't save him, but I didn't stop the fight. I was either going down, or I was going to find a way back. But I was broken in that moment.”

Jodi is the executive director at Interfaith Sanctuary homeless shelter. She and her husband, internationally renowned musician Curtis Stigers, collaborate on music events, such as “The Xtreme Holiday Extravaganza,” to benefit the shelter. They are newlyweds; they got married on April 18, 2019. Jodi has two sons from a previous marriage: Max, who is nineteen, and Sam, who is twenty-two. Curtis's daughter, Ruby, is nineteen.

Jodi's Hero: Her Dad

Jodi had a wonderful childhood. Her mom and dad raised her two older sisters and her in a Reform Jewish home in southern California. "I was very well taken care of. I felt safe my whole life," she says. "I was given the power to believe I could do anything because of my parents. They were salt of the earth and took care of everyone. My dad has always been my role model as far as how you treat people and how you see people. They set me up really well to understand someday why I had all those tools. When you're younger, you don't know what to do with them."

Her father was a self-made man. His parents had emigrated from Russia. "He was born in Oklahoma a chubby little stuttering Jewish boy who went to the military at age seventeen." Jodi says. "He went to the University of Oklahoma and then talked his way into Harvard Business School for his master's degree. He overcame stuttering by public speaking. He pushed through adversity constantly. I saw that as a strength in him. I learned a lot about him from storytelling.

Instrumental in the creation of Midas[®] Total Muffler Care, her dad was a very successful businessman and a great mentor. He was Jodi's hero.

Thirteen years ago, Jodi's mom was diagnosed with cancer. She died seven months later.

Her parents were both eighteen when they met on a blind date. They were married six weeks later and stayed married for forty-nine years. Her death devastated Jodi's dad.

"One year to the day after my mom died, my dad had a psychotic break," Jodi says. "I was the one who went home to find him like that. That's when the reality set in that my dad had actually had mental-health issues my entire life. But my mom managed it quietly so we would be OK and so our company wouldn't suffer. When we thought he was away on business trips, he was actually getting electroshock therapy. I figured this out when I was looking through my mom's Rolodex to see who to call because my dad wanted to kill himself. He wanted me to help. It was very confusing because I had never experienced this version of my father. And that was the beginning of the process of understanding how strong my mother was."

That experience put Jodi on the course she is on now to help others avoid the problems in the system of psychiatric care, which include a lack in continuity of care. Her dad was extremely sick for seven years. He had been diagnosed with advanced depression and manic depression.

"Basically, the rational side of his brain did not function. The irrational side was the only thing that was talking to him. So he was seeing and believing things that were not real," Jodi recalls. "My dad's body and face were there, but his mind was gone."

Every now and then, the electroshock therapy would bring Jodi's dad back for a day or two, but those moments of clarity were inconsistent. Because he didn't move around much, he got sepsis and ended up in hospice care. The hospice-care team took him off his medications during his last weeks of life, and Jodi says he had moments of greatness during that brief period. "He was funny, he was gentle, and he was so polite to hospice care," Jodi says. "I got to spend two weeks with my old dad before he passed away. But it was brutal."

Strained Family Relationships

Their dad's prolonged illness and his death took a toll on the family's relationships. Jodi and her two sister shared many of the responsibilities of caring for their dad. Each of the sisters had a role to help support their Dad and each other. After their Dad passed that next year was a real struggle and the sisters struggled in their relationships with each other.

But a Jewish tradition helped them heal that rift.

"That's why Jews place the headstone a year after a loved one dies. The day we laid my dad to rest, we were broken. We were tired. We had so many unanswered questions," she explains. "A lot of stuff unfolded before we got to that first anniversary of his death. By the time we got there, we had found our way back. I was grateful for the way Judaism handles the mourning process."

A New Perspective on the Mentally Ill Homeless Population

Jodi had been staying with her dad a lot, and when she returned to California, she realized that her vision had changed about the homeless population she was serving.

"I realized that most of the people who were struggling out on the streets were very much like my dad, but they didn't have three daughters, extended health care, a lovely home, and the ability to have twenty-four-hour caregivers," Jodi says. "And people wondered why they weren't taking care of themselves by packing up and getting a job. I was moved to tell their stories and to bring them support. I guess my counselor would say that I wasn't ready to stop taking care of my father, so I just found a lot more of people like him."

She says it was a blessing that they needed her because she needed them, too.

She met a homeless man named Bodhi who had no shoes, so she gave him her dad's work boots. And that's where Jodi found her fight.

"They have no voice at all. No one is coming back here and talking to them; they're just labeling them and cutting them off," Jodi says. "And that's making them sicker and less likely to get services that can help them get better. That seemed really inhumane to me."

Jodi ramped up her commitment to helping homeless people while she was a single mom. But she says her incredible support system helps her a lot.

"I have my boys and my village. I have never felt like I've been going it alone," she says. "I feel like I'm self-propelled. And my kids hold me to task. I've made better choices because I'm a single mom—they need me to be around."

Jodi doesn't think she would have this steadfast commitment to helping homeless people if her dad hadn't suffered the way he did.

"I wouldn't have understood because I was living outside of it," she says. When she coordinated an annual fund-raising event for the homeless shelter, she helped establish a work program and a music program. "I'd show up on a Wednesday night and practice music with the band. But then I'd just go home. I wasn't out in the ally," she says. "But it's different walking in

their shoes, having to fight for people where they are. Going through the process with Bodhi, I saw how this system is shutting doors to people with mental illness. I wouldn't have known how to do this. Now I know there is nothing I should be doing but this. My dad gave me the greatest gift when I lost him. I am supposed to do this."

Even though her parents raised her to talk to people and care about them, Jodi says she had a lot of self-doubt about launching her outreach efforts to the homeless.

"I had a hard time believing in myself. I wasn't book smart. I could write well, but I didn't do well in science in math," she says. The rest of my family was very smart that way. My parents used to say I was the cute, athletic one. I just didn't think I'd ever measure up to the level that my family was. The work I do now is what makes me feel like I've lived up to my parents' expectations."

When Jodi first found out about her dad's illness, she was upset that her mom didn't let her and her sisters know what was happening. But now she knows their mom shielded them from the truth for the most unselfish reasons. Jodi's mom had lost her dad when she was seven and her mom when she was seventeen, and she took care of her own mother during the last year of her cancer battle. Being strong and keeping her family together was everything to Jodi's mother.

And her dad loved her immensely because of it.

"Every time there was a bat mitzvah or a wedding in our family, my dad always raised a glass to my mom and said, 'You have saved my life again and again, and I love you so much.' We never really understood what that meant," Jodi says. "Now, looking back, we know what he meant. She saved his life again and again. She kept their very successful business going while taking care of him and the three of us."

The Best Business Model: Treat People with Compassion

Jodi's dad gave her the gift of seeing everyone the same. He had Midas Muffler dealerships in California. He owned the properties, and he built and ran the businesses. He had mechanics who worked for him for thirty years. Usually there's a lot of turnaround in that kind of industry.

"But not with my dad because he knew about their families. He got them Angels tickets. He gave them coupons to take their families out to dinner. He knew everything about them and if they ever needed anything," Jodi says. "His job was to make sure his employees were OK so that his customers were OK. That's the most brilliant business model there is—he was so compassionate."

Second Chance University

Many homeless people are unable to get jobs because they have criminal histories. Jodi says it is discouraging to see people who are eager to get work, submitting their résumés online, but getting shut out of the system because they check the box in the online application that asks if they have ever been convicted of a felony.

Jodi proposed a program that would prepare shelter guests to get back into the workforce by creating a partnership with The City of Boise's Parks and Recreation Department. Guests staying at the shelter are hired by the City to be a part of the park crews keeping our parks and city streets clean and beautiful.

Felonies involving murder and sexual misconduct render people ineligible for the program, but for nonviolent offenses, Jodi, Andy, and their team at Interfaith Sanctuary have worked hard to lower the barrier to allow people with past offenses to get a second chance for employment.

"We provide mental-health support with case management on-site to help eliminate any potential issues that Parks and Rec might have in managing this crew as they're getting back to work," Jodi explains. "A couple more employers are now working directly with us. They're large employers that are doing group hiring."

In the past two years, the shelter has received \$200,000 in funding from the J.A. & Kathryn Albertson Foundation to help move forward with Second Chance University. One component of this program is to build an entire campus that features affordable housing in the form of shipping containers, for overnight shelter and transitional housing. Various agencies will provide services from a main building.

The J.A. & Kathryn Albertson Foundation liked the idea of a campus. They asked Jodi to envision what Second Chance University could look like with all the different collaboration they have. "So I put together a dream team of everyone who would contribute to Second Chance University, and they presented their ideas. Then we got the green light to make a more formal presentation, which I did recently."

Once Second Chance University is complete, Jodi would like to invite people from all over the country to come see what her team is doing and then replicate it in other communities.

Removing the Barriers

Jodi did a TED talk in 2017 about helping a homeless man, Bodhi, get his identity back. The talk focuses on all the hoops Jodi and Bodhi had to jump through to finally get the proper documents that would allow Bodhi to get a State ID and then a job. A man, by the name of Michael Perry, who had been in a California prison for more than twenty-six years, saw Jodi's TedTalk and contacted her through the Interfaith website.

He had been released from prison with no ID card, so he could not move forward in terms of getting assimilated back into society.

She worked with the national executive director for the Department of Corrections and with the Idaho Transportation Department and got the man an ID. Solving this issue on a national level is one of the goals of Jodi and her team. "These types of practical issues stop people in their tracks from being able to move forward," she says. "Many of these people want to right their wrongs."

How Jodi's Son Launched a Partnership with St. Luke's

Jodi's son, Sam, was the key player in launching a new partnership between the Interfaith Sanctuary shelter and St. Luke's Medical Center. The program helps ensure that homeless people who are released from the hospital are taken to the shelter.

In Sam's senior year at Boise State University, he was one of two students selected to participate in a research program in the emergency room at St. Luke's that connects homeless or uninsured people with services outside the emergency medical system.

For example, Sam has been connecting people who are overusing emergency medicine with medical providers such as doctors, dentists, and ophthalmologists.

"One day, Sam called me and told me a homeless patient was going to be discharged in one hour. The man had a lot of pain in his leg, and he had a doctor's appointment scheduled for the next day. Sam asked if he could discharge the patient to me at the shelter because we have daytime case management," Jodi explains. "So for the first time, St. Luke's did a soft handoff. They gave the patient transportation and had him dropped off at our shelter. It used to be called 'patient dumping' because they didn't call us. We didn't know they were coming, and they'd be out in the alley for four or five hours. They would end up back at the hospital because of dehydration or excessive pain."

Sam gave Jodi a file containing the patient's information and details about his doctor's appointment the next day. Jodi's case manager did the intake, got the patient in bed, kept him hydrated, made sure he was OK, and took him to the doctor the next day. Then St. Luke's research department called Jodie and asked if she could create a program that formalized that intake approach.

"So my son sparked this new program, and now we do intake for any guests who are homeless and need a place to be when they're discharged from the hospital. We are helping carry forward that research to help them connect to the medical community."

It wasn't just part of Sam's job, though; Sam learned all about compassion from his grandfather—Jodi's father. "He didn't want that man to have nowhere to go," Jodi says.

To someone who has never worked with the homeless population, it might seem like a draining, difficult lifestyle. But the people Jodi works with at the shelter actually energize her; it's the systems *outside* her work that drain her.

"If the system itself is breaking me down, I just go hang out at the shelter, hold the babies, talk to my guests, and hang out. It's the systems outside my work that suck the life of me—the policies and laws and regulations that are so silly," Jodi concludes."

"The work I do now is what makes me feel like I've lived up to my parents' expectations."