

Former Client Speaks at Agency Annual Dinner

Hi, I'm Shannon Leffler and a couple years ago I was a part of the FADSS program through Community Action. At that time I had also qualified for the Energy Assistance program.

Before I get into that too much, let me explain a little bit about my personal story and how I came to need the assistance of the Community Action programs.

I was married at the age of 19 and had my first child a month before I turned 20. I was in an extremely abusive relationship for eight years. Well, in 2000 I had finally had enough and decided to divorce my husband. In 2001, my divorce became final and around the same time I was told that the company that I was working for was dissolving and I would be out of a job.

I was suddenly not only a single mom with three kids to support, but an unemployed single mom. I realized that I wasn't going to find a job that paid enough to raise my three children comfortably, and I knew I didn't want to be on welfare for a long period of time, so I decided my best chance was to go back to college for accounting. It was something that I had always wanted to do, but because of my marriage at the time, I wasn't able to. I figured, what better time to make a change. My life was turning upside down and very quickly, I might add. It was almost like God was telling me that I really needed a change and I needed it now.

I enrolled in college the following semester at Southeastern Community College. For my first year of college, we lived on unemployment, child support, and student loans. Well, at around the same time my unemployment had run out and suddenly there was no money coming in at all. I was half way through my second year at college and doing very well I

might add. My choices were, either quit school and get a lower paying job or stick it out and enter into the welfare system.

I knew that finding a job would be an immediate, quick fix, but it wouldn't help me long term. I qualified for welfare and some of the Community Action programs. I decided that if I was going to enroll in the low (or in my case no) income assistance programs, that I wasn't going to be in them for very long and I was going to try to complete my schooling in as short of time as possible. I continued with my schooling and once I graduated from SCC with honors, I transferred to Iowa Wesleyan. With the help of my parents, I was able to cram two years at Iowa Wesleyan into a year and a half. I took night courses, summer courses, and went full time during the day. As I stated earlier, I was also taking night courses and at the same time I was working as an unpaid intern at Great River Medical Center (another college requirement). I think this was probably the most hectic time of my life and although, I am proud of my accomplishments, I am thankful that it is over. I very seldom saw my children and when I did it was long enough to pick them up, take them home, and put them to bed.

Not only were these last two years a hectic time for me, but financially, we were living hand to mouth. My children went without things more times than I can count. This is where Community Action came in. I was living on a welfare check with food stamps and, yes, college loans to make ends meet, but there were times that I found myself unable to pay a utility or water bill. I had qualified for Energy Assistance the previous years, but at times that didn't even seem to



be enough. That's around the same time that Deb Ball introduced me to the Family Development and Self-Sufficiency Program (FADSS). This program offered me the extra financial help that I needed to pay these bills. But I have to say, the program (and more specifically Deb) offered a lot more than just financial help. I can remember one year, (I think it was my last year of college) things had gotten so bad financially and I had absolutely no money for Christmas. I had always managed to do something for Christmas the previous years. I couldn't bare the thought of telling my kids that there would be no Christmas this year. Deb told me about local companies that adopt families for Christmas. I can remember when Deb called me to tell me that GE had chosen my family. It was like a huge weight was lifted. My kids would have a decent Christmas and it was one less thing that I had to worry about. That Christmas was one of the best my children had had during those few years. The looks on their faces that Christmas morning was priceless. My son told me last year that he can still remember that Christmas when the tree was filled with presents. I explained where all of those presents came from and he thought that was the neatest thing that there are people out there who actually do things like that.

All of that wouldn't have been possible without the FADSS program. That's why, even though public speaking terrifies me, I couldn't say no when Deb asked me to speak tonight. She asked me to speak because I made it through the program successfully. I made it through college with the help of these programs and now I am an accountant for Great River Medical Center and have been for the past three years. I have enrolled at St. Ambrose University where I will be studying towards my MBA degree and eventually sit for my CPA exams.

Don't get me wrong, I'm proud of my accomplishments, but I think the true success story here should really be those of you who work for Community Action and those that do their best everyday to help people like me who are trying to better themselves, or those who are unemployed, or just those who are simply in need of some extra financial help. You're not only employees for Community Action, but those of you whom I had the opportunity to deal with, honestly care about what you are doing. You don't judge the people you are helping and you do the best that you can for each and every one of us. I can honestly say that without the help and support of Community Action and Deb, I may not have made it through college and I probably

wouldn't be where I am today. So the real round of applause should go to all of you.



Thanks for Your Help!

To apply for assistance contact the local Community Action Centers in Louisa County – (319) 728-2314 or Des Moines County (319) 753-2893. Funds will only be available for a limited time and may be exhausted at any time. For more information contact, Lyn Stinson 319-753-0193.

Today is a critical time for families that we are working with. Some have lost jobs, hours have been cut if they are working, having a hard time making decisions on whether to pay utilities, rent or to buy food.

However because of the Community and people who care about others, who are willing to share to make life better for those who are less fortunate. We at Community Action want to express our thanks to all the individuals, companies, churches, and organizations for all that you have done during the entire year. Your generosity of giving food to the pantry, money, coats, hats, gloves, toys and food vouchers brightens the lives of families that we serve throughout the year.

Again THANK YOU!

Community Action has five Community Action Neighborhood Centers where clients come in needing food and assistance with rent & utility deposits. This assistance can help them from becoming homeless. Community Action strives to keep families in their homes by assisting with deposits but the problem is finding the resources to achieve this goal. Once we have helped families stabilize their living situation, our Family Development Specialists work with them to help them overcome obstacles and set goals. We have many clients who have benefited from assistance but now we need YOUR ASSISTANCE to help us help them.

Please consider giving a tax free donation in the envelope provided to help us assist the neighbors in your community. This is what Community Action is all about, helping people help themselves. *Thank you.*



*Community
Action Annual
Dinner*

*Pictured at the dinner
from left to right: Jane
Wilson, Lyn Stinson,
Prestyn Lewis,
Christine O'Brien and
wearing one of the
party masks is
Cheryl Flaatten.*

Management Staff

Sharon L. Ford
Executive Director
Sheri Wilson Lewis
Executive Assistant
Martin Distelhorst
Community Resource Director
Cheryl Flaatten
Daycare Resource & Referral
Child Food Program Director
Sandra Gerst
Fiscal Director
Marcia Munford
Head Start Director
Christine O'Brien
WIC Director
Tom Richert
Weatherization Director
Lyn Stinson
Neighborhood Center Director
Jane Wilson
Energy Assistance Director

Neighborhood Centers

Community Action Centers are open weekdays from 8:00 a.m. until 4:30 p.m. with staff available to provide information, referrals, emergency assistance and food.

Des Moines County Neighborhood Center

700 Jefferson Street, Burlington IA 52601 (319) 753-2893

Tolson Center

1303 W Washington, Mount Pleasant IA 52641 (319) 385-2310

Eichacker Center

3433 Avenue O, Fort Madison IA 52627 (319) 372-4471

Marie Tallarico Center

210 South 22nd Street
P.O. Box 663, Keokuk IA 52632 (319) 524-6383

Louisa County Center

205 E Access Street, Suite D

Community Action of Southeast Iowa

2850 Mount Pleasant Street, Suite 108
Burlington, Iowa 52601

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