

Happy Tears Flow as Local Family Completes Portage County's START Program

At 14, Gavin is not known to show emotion. But as he and his three siblings, ages 15, 8, and 21 months, watched their mother, Tara, graduate from Portage County Children Services Ohio START program, Gavin's shoulders started to shake. "I love you so much," he said through tears he could not hold in.

You could sense Gavin's relief, that after ten months of supportive recovery, his mom is beginning a new chapter in her life and her care for her children. You could sense his hope that better days for their family lie ahead. "It's beautiful to see and witness," said Ohio START family peer mentor Ashley Mock. "They're happy tears."

Tara is the second person to complete the Portage County program that was launched in October 2020. Portage County is part of the third cohort in the state to implement Ohio START, which stands for Sobriety, Treatment, and Reducing Trauma. When a child's safety is in jeopardy due to a parent's substance use, Ohio START seeks to quickly implement a plan to help the family into recovery. Tara voluntarily agreed to Ohio START services in February 2021.

Tara struggled with methamphetamine use. Stable relationships eluded her. Each of the children, the youngest born in March 2020, has a different father. Children services became involved when her 8-year-old daughter found the baby with a rock of crystal meth in his mouth.

Through Ohio START, Tara entered counseling with Coleman Health Services, a partner with Children Services in Portage County's program. She has received counseling for substance use disorder (SUD), mental health, trauma and anger management. "You didn't want to be angry anymore," said Karen Kubinski,

Ohio START caseworker from Portage County Job & Family Services. Karen, Ashley, and former peer mentor Jennifer Kisner, met with Tara weekly during her recovery. "You've been amazing to watch," Karen said during the graduation on December 17, 2021. Tara completed Coleman's Intensive Outpatient Treatment (IOP) and graduated from the agency's aftercare services. Drug screens taken regularly since March have come back negative.

"Everything has been absolutely wonderful," she said of the services provided through OhioSTART. While Jennifer is no longer Tara's peer mentor, she has maintained a relationship with Tara and her children. "You have a whole new shine about you when you walked

through the door," Jennifer said. "This is the real test now," she told Tara. "Hold yourself accountable and reach out to your tree." That support system includes Tara's sister, Kayla, who "always has been" her best friend and their mother, Kimberly, who has helped care for the children during Tara's recovery.

With stable housing and employment, Tara has been better able to provide for her children, both physically and emotionally. "I've watched you grow into your role as a mom," Ashley said. Her children appreciate the difference. As her youngest toddles around the room cheerfully smiling and playing with his siblings, Gavin summed up what they're all feeling, "I'm proud of you, mom."



Tara, second from left, surrounded by her children: Kadin (15), Samara (8), Gavin (14), and baby Grayson (21 months)



Tara's support system includes former family peer mentor Jennifer Kisner, on left and her sister Kayla, right.