

"I've come a long way." First Participant Completes New Program to Help Parents with Substance Use Issues



Heather holds a smiling Raheem. The future looks brighter for the two of them.

At 3 years old, Raheem is your typical toddler. He rolls an apple across the table. His lips are tinged green from the frosting on his cupcake. He chatters as he sits on his mom's lap in the family team meeting room at Portage County Job & Family Services. They are here for a special first that, though he may not know it, Raheem helped inspire.

Raheem's mom, Heather, is graduating from Portage County Children Services Ohio START program. She is the first person to successfully complete the program, and it's the first time she has closed a case plan with Children Services. "I think you guys did an amazing job," Heather tells the START team, which includes Family Peer Mentor Ashley Mock, caseworker Karen Kubinski and supervisors Kaylyn Kane and Chad Dye, clinical director of case management services at Coleman Health Services, a partner in the program. "When you pushed back, it wasn't what I expected," Heather said.

START stands for Sobriety, Treatment and Reducing Trauma. It's a program designed to help parents whose substance use has put their child's safety in jeopardy. In Heather's case, she used methamphetamine with a former boyfriend who she says she "spent a year trying to save." She risked losing custody of Raheem, the youngest of her three children. She had already lost custody of her two older kids, ages 16 and 10.

"Nobody wants to deal with children services," Heather said. But this time was different. Once Heather agreed to participate in START, the team acted immediately to get her the help that would change her life. She entered a recovery program at New Day in the Youngstown-area where she spent five days in detox. "I had to admit to a lot of things at New Day," she said. After she successfully completed that program, she entered intensive outpatient treatment (IOP) and aftercare. Under START, Ashley and Karen met weekly with Heather to check on and encourage her progress. "When you got in trouble, you owned it," Ashley said. "You took direction."

"I worked hard," Heather said. Part of what fueled her change was the desire to be a better parent to Raheem. Along the way she realized, "I'm worth more than this. I deserve more than this."

"It's hard to picture my life in a different way than it is today," Heather said. Graduating from the START program marks a new beginning for the 33-year-old. But she still has to deal with issues from the past. She faces felony drug and theft charges and has a court date in January. Her approach now, though, is different. "This time, my first instinct was not to run," she said when she learned she had been indicted. She's made a plan for Raheem's care and is ready to handle future challenges. "I don't have to be okay every day," she said. But she now has the tools to deal with what life throws at her. And she's able to reach out for help from her support team when she needs it. "I've come a long way. I can see the change in myself."



Portage County's START team surrounds Heather & Raheem at her graduation. The team includes, from left, Supervisor Kaylyn Kane, Caseworker Karen Kubinski, Family Peer Mentor Ashley Mock, Coleman Health Services' Jennifer Uhl, and Nicole Campana from New Day Recovery.

