

February 10, 2020

Morrisville –Public Hearing

Good Evening Vermont Legislators,

My Name is Aubrie St. Louis,

I'm here this evening to share with you my story and emphasize my support for the Capstone Community Action Micro Business Development Program, IDA Personal Financial Workshops and 1 to 1 Money Coaching Programs.

In late 2017 I brought a beautiful and healthy baby boy into the world, Leo, in Santa Monica California. I was in a very abusive relationship and when Leo was 3 weeks old, we fled our situation and landed back in my home state of Vermont. I was scared and starting from scratch with not much more than 2 nickels to rub together. The benefits programs provided by the state of Vermont were my saving grace. Reach Up provided me with the means to live and pay the bills, albeit for a maximum of two years (still an amazing program!) Ready-to-go rides helped me get from place to place to take care of my son. WIC and 3 Squares helped me keep food on the table. AWARE helped me orchestrate my legal battle. Good News Garage put a reliable car under us. Capstone supported me in the home and helped me navigate my son's visitation with his biological father. They helped me find child care and the child care subsidy I needed to start working again. I felt so fortunate and I am so grateful for what these programs provided for me.

However, that wasn't everything I needed. Unlike the assumed stereo-type and stigma that goes along with the "type of person" receiving state benefits and assistance from programs like Capstone,

I was determined and capable of more, I just lacked some of the confidence and knowhow to get there. That's when Amy told me about Mary, and I was introduced to the program benefits of the aforementioned Capstone Programs were discussing tonight.

I immediately signed up for the financial coaching sessions and scheduled my first meeting with Mary. I already understood budgeting and balancing and saving money, as I had been a number of months both in Vermont and California "scraping by" financially as it were, so I knew I was pretty good at getting by on very little, my biggest concern was understanding credit, and growing my money so I could escape the vicious "debt to income ratio" cycle that so many people get stuck in these days. Mary knew exactly what I needed, and she taught me what to look for, what to monitor, and how to stay on top of my credit and make credit work for me, instead of the other way around. Most importantly she was able to present the information so clearly and in an easy to understand format, so that it was effortless to apply to my everyday life and actually put into action.

I had always dreamed of owning and operating my own salon, but it seemed as though that reality was lightyears away from me. After attending Mary's classes and completing her program I had a new outlook on the prospect of achieving my dream. In October of 2018 I began negotiations to purchase the business assets of an existing salon in Hardwick Vermont. By January 1, 2019 ownership of that business had fully transferred and I had rebranded the salon to The Rehair Shop LLC. By mid-March 2019 I had secured \$62,500.00 worth of financing, finalized the purchase of the business assets, and had started renovations to transform the shop. I'm proud to announce that we are still operating a year later with a completely new look (nearly finished!), new atmosphere and a great first year generating over \$80,000.00 in service sales and coming out on top with a profit!

The business has promise for the foreseeable future as well, with the current potential to create between 4-6 jobs, provide mentor and apprenticeship opportunities, and occupy and activate storefront space on Mainstreet of a small Vermont town.

Overall, I can confidently say that my journey can reflect on the Capstone Community Action programs, as a success story. I feel I was significantly aided by the services they provided to me, and believe that without these programs I wouldn't be where I am today. I'm a huge believer and advocate for the financial coaching program and the business development programs that Mary provides, as she is an incredible teacher and truly individualizes the information and education she provides to cater to the needs of the students she's working with. These are not "cookie cutter" classes, they are so much more, which is the reason they are so successful. My hope is that with the continuation of these essential programs there can be more success stories for an increasing number of community members receiving assistance. Not everyone going through these programs will open a business, but the programs service a wide variety of community members, ultimately turning the demographic that is currently seeking assistance and struggling to be a contributing member of society for lack of knowhow, into successful household budgeters, job holders, and educated parents, properly prepared to pass on the knowledge to the generations to come, and break the poverty cycles. The programs are the building blocks of more businesses, more jobs, more vibrant communities, more economical growth, and a more successful Vermont.

For what it's worth, this program reminds me of the saying "Give a man a fish, feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish Feed him for a lifetime."

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