

# **“Where are they Now”**

## **Kristen Aucter**

I started at Lewis County Opportunities on Sept 15 2009. I had left a job in Syracuse in 2008 to move back to Lewis County at the absolute worst time ever. There was a recession and my degree in Travel and Tourism was not helpful at all. My position in the Wheels for Work Program was temporary and funded by the, sometimes controversial, American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). While many critics of the Act state that it didn't change America how it was supposed to, I would say on a personal level it changed everything.

My job at the time was to identify and assist people in the community whose only challenge to finding or keeping a job was transportation. We were able to provide repairs to vehicles, assist with insurance, the occasional car payment if they were struggling in one particular month and often times had to think outside of the box to identify alternative forms of transportation. We were able to purchase bus vouchers, gas cards and if a bicycle would provide the transportation to work we would have been able to purchase that for a qualifying individual as well. While I don't recall exactly how many people I helped I remember that there was never a shortage of applications coming through the door. While working at Opportunities I was introduced to the Domestic Violence/Rape Crisis Program, now Victim Services. Opportunities provided me the chance to train to be a volunteer on their 24 Hr Crisis Hotline. After 60 hours, that flew by, I was officially allowed to answer calls. While this was not part of my job requirements there, it opened a door to a position in the Victim Services Department once ARRA funds ran out.

Once in the Victim Services Department my responsibilities went from addressing transportation issues to a much more personal issue in the community. Domestic violence in a small town leads to certain barriers that larger cities may not comprehend. While assisting victims with orders of protection, court appearances, safe dwelling services, medical crisis intervention etc., we dealt with strong gender stereotypes, fear of lack of anonymity/confidentiality and, again, transportation issues. While these issues are not specific to rural areas they were very prominent in what I saw. My role in the department transformed into a more educational position as I identified more and more barriers that were affecting the community as a whole and wanted to attempt a more preventative approach. During my 6 years in the department I taught every age group in local schools. I provided curriculums geared toward preventing child sexual abuse to elementary aged students, effective communication to middle school students and safe dating to high school students. Unfortunately, we may never know of the 300+ students that I spoke with what was prevented. It is impossible to identify what path your life would have taken if you had not learned techniques to protect yourself. However, based on the feedback from students I would like to believe that I saved at least one person from being victimized or at least helped direct others to safety.

My time at Opportunities opened my eyes to a whole other side of Lewis County. When I left in 2016 I knew that while this was where I wanted to spend the rest of my life, I also knew that it needed more. It needed more job opportunities, more compassionate people willing to lend a hand and more people in "power" standing up to support those who didn't have a voice. My most recent position is as the

Executive Director at the Lewis County Chamber of Commerce. While still new at my position here I hope that I will be able to use it as a launching point to continue to grow our community into a caring place where people can prosper both financially and emotionally with support from one another.



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**"Character is how you treat those who can do nothing for you"**  
*Malcolm S. Forbes*