



FACES OF POVERTY: SHANNON GRIFFIN

## Paying it forward: Auburn single mother battles disability to raise daughters, give back



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Shannon Griffin typically wakes to the sound of her alarm around 5:30 a.m. What happens next could decide her whole day.

On a good day, the 39-year-old Auburn woman is able to collect herself without much problem, getting out of bed and making sure her two daughters, 11 and 17, make it to school.

When it's one of *those* days, Shannon's body lets her know. On those days, her back growls with pain when she attempts to rise, urging the 39-year-old to remain prone. Sometimes a hot shower is enough to dull the pain, she says. Sometimes it's not.

Shannon never used to have those days. But now, she said, bad days have been fairly common for about eight years since sustaining significant injuries to portions of her spine.

Since then, Shannon has been at the mercy of her body.

She can't drive. And she can't work — certainly not at the level she used to or the level that she needs to. Even sleeping can be a chore. And with her unemployment, Shannon's physical struggles are reflected in her finances.

Right now, she's trying to keep her family afloat on about \$1,200 per month from her disability allowance and an allotment of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits. Is it enough?

"Not even close," she said.

### Unstable

Finances were the least of Shannon's concerns before the accident.

In 2006, the Auburn woman was working two and a half jobs to support her children. Her daughters were fathered by two different men. One is still present in his daughter's life, but the other is not, she said.

Regardless, Shannon said, she didn't have to worry very much about going to court for child

support back then. She actively worked as a nurse at several local facilities and also held a full-time job at Tessy Plastics in Elbridge.

When those weren't enough, Shannon would pick up the slack part-time. She's worked as a clerk at Tops. She's delivered pizzas for Domino's.

But life was good. "We didn't really have any worries," she remarked.

In the past, Shannon was a volunteer for the Cayuga/Seneca Community Action Agency and her youngest daughter was part of the Head Start program. To celebrate the end of the year in May 2006, her daughter's Head Start class wanted to have a party.

A roller-skating party at Reva Rollerdrome in Auburn.

It was supposed to be harmless. So when Shannon slipped and fell on her roller skates, she just thought that she bruised her bottom. "I guess my balance wasn't what I thought it was," she deadpanned.

But when she couldn't stand up, Shannon knew something was wrong.

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Doctors called it a construction worker's injury, Shannon said.

After she was taken by ambulance to Auburn Community Hospital, medical staff assessed her injuries. With her tumble, Shannon fractured several vertebrae in her back. It was an injury determined to be much worse than what circumstances dictated.

"They said instead of me falling three inches off the ground on roller skates, it was more like I fell off of a three-story building," she said.

It wasn't long before Shannon was transferred to Upstate University Hospital in Syracuse. Doctors tried "almost everything" to help her heal, Shannon said, but nothing worked.

"My back just wouldn't heal," she said. "First bone I've ever broken. It wouldn't heal."

Her routine of hard work and three jobs was broken. She couldn't work anymore. Pretty soon, Shannon could not take care of herself or her daughters without help.

She and her family moved into her mother's small two-bedroom apartment at Genesee Gardens. In that apartment, there was a reclining chair.

That chair was where Shannon said she spent much of her life for three years after her fall.

Shannon underwent back surgery in 2008.

The vertebrae were showing no signs of healing; on the contrary, she developed compressed fractures developed in her back, she said.

With the surgery, Shannon said doctors removed six vertebrae from her back. Those were then replaced with two titanium rods and wire cages with screws to hold her together.

Much of Shannon's recovery was spent strengthening her physical muscles, but she was devastated by the passing of her mother in 2011. Shannon was working to be able to walk without a cane, and her mother's death took the ground from beneath her feet, she said.

The Auburn woman described her mother as her rock, her "best friend." And life for Shannon and her family was again thrown off as they had to move out from her mother's apartment. Fortunately, Shannon said her sisters stepped in to fill the void.

Shannon's family moved into the home belonging to her eldest sister, Dawn. But it wasn't long before Shannon said Dawn took her generosity even further.

With help from her mother's inheritance, a year's worth of backed salary payments from Shannon due to disability, and a lot of out-of-pocket expenses, Dawn bought her sister and her family their new home just outside downtown.

The two sisters have a unique landlord-tenant relationship where Dawn steps in whenever Shannon needs help, Shannon said.

"If it wasn't for my sister, I don't know where I'd be," she said. "She knew my situation. She knew I was at a loss."

With a new home, Shannon began to regain her footing and focused once again on raising her children. But with her physical limitations, it hasn't been easy.

## **New balance**

It starts at the material level. Cellphone plans are prepaid, talk only. The family's cable and Internet deals are among the most basic of packages.

On every level, Shannon's daughters have felt the constraints. "Maybe one out of four things my kids ask for, they get one," she said. The family's financial struggles have occasionally made certain extracurricular activities for the girls impossible.

For her 17-year-old, whom Shannon regarded as a bright student, this meant skipping participation in the opportunity to study abroad.

Her daughter was invited to take part in a student ambassador program. She would have gone to Italy, but a daunting participation cost dashed any hope of that happening.

There have been times where Shannon's youngest daughter, described as much more of a "social butterfly," has been inconsistent with her interests like many kids her age, Shannon said. One day, it's Girl Scouts. The next, it's skating lessons. After that, it's cheerleading.

But sometimes, particularly with the cheerleading, Shannon simply can't afford the opportunity to give her a chance to try.

Saying no is not something Shannon wants to do. And when she does, it's "heartbreaking."

"It hurts," she said. "It makes you really sit back and think of different ways that you can cut back in your life to make it so that you do have that extra \$10, \$15 dollars to send them to Champs once every week or every other week if they want to go 'cause it's what all their friends are

doing.

"You just make as many cutbacks as possible to make what the children want to do."

The girls have handled it well, she said. Other than the occasional huffs and puffs, Shannon said they don't complain, accepting that some things are "just not possible."

Shannon's hardships have required her children, particularly her 17-year-old, to act older than their years. When Shannon was "stuck in a recliner," her eldest daughter worked to care for her baby sister, learning to cook and help her grandmother with the day-to-day chores.

"Thankfully, I have two amazing children that understand."

## Moving forward

Shannon knows her situation is not as bad as many others in her community.

There are local people, struggling people, **who don't have the support of their families.** They may have a **spectrum of demons that they need to deal with.**

Shannon will not be able to work in the foreseeable future due to her condition. But at least, she says, she had a person like her mother in her life to support her, and her sister after that.

Shannon also will not be able to give her children the world like she'd like to, but at least they understand.

"With me, I've got strong family support," she said. "A lot of people don't have that."

The Auburn woman has seen firsthand what "a lot of people" actually do have. She's encountered individuals dealing with their own problems as one of the organizers of Pay It Forward, a local group designed to help people struggling in need.

Pay It Forward is fueled almost entirely by Facebook and has more than 800 members so far. It operates like a community, Shannon said: If a legitimate need is identified, organizers work with other members to help fill that need.

This can be helping a person struggling with domestic violence issues, losing their home in a fire, or being in a situation where all they have are the clothes on their back, Shannon said.

Additionally, Pay It Forward facilitates non-monetary donations, and only non-monetary, by giving back to the community and local agencies such as Chapel House in Auburn.

Operated by a handful of administrative members, Pay It Forward covers areas in and around Auburn, Weedsport, Port Byron and Skaneateles. While it was started more than a year ago, Shannon said it really picked up steam around Halloween last year.

For children, Halloween likely means a Halloween parade at their school. But if a parent can't afford a costume for their children, it's the worst feeling, Shannon said.

"Nobody wants their child to be that child that's walking in the back and holding the teacher's hand and walking in back next to the teacher without a costume," she said.

When a parent needed Halloween costumes for two little girls, the group responded with more than 100 costumes within the first few days of the request, Shannon said.

Chico Martinez, a homeless advocate and part-timer at Chapel House, lauded the Auburn woman's efforts in organizing such a group.

Last Wednesday, Pay It Forward volunteers dropped off more than 50 pillows to Chapel House. And whether it's dropping off pillows or supporting victims of domestic violence and fires, Shannon's actions are great for the community, Martinez said.

"It just shows that people with disabilities, they can be successful," he said. "The social aspect of that is she's giving back."

Sometimes, though, Shannon's back disagrees with her selflessness.

She said she helps members with pickups and drop-offs of donated goods. Her back doesn't complain when the items are lighter — like pillows or costumes.

But boxes of food? Or household appliances? It becomes unbearable after less than an hour, she said.

Regardless, Shannon plans on helping Pay It Forward grow even further. Organizers are looking into getting the group certified and promoting further outreach to a greater area.

She references her mother as part of the inspiration for why she keeps going with Pay It Forward. Her mother, Shannon said, was the type of person that would help out anyone with anything.

And with her back, there will always be the good days and the bad days, Shannon said. But she'll deal with it.

"Even though I might be going through some physical pain," she said, "other people are going through so much worse."