

COMMUNITY PROFILE



In 1999, Steph Fyfe opened Steph's Espresso on Olympic Highway North in Shelton. Her charitable gifts began soon afterward. Journal photo by Gordon Weeks

From Oklahoma jail to new life in Shelton

By Gordon Weeks
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When Steph Fyfe walked out of an Oklahoma City jail into the winter cold with \$5 in her pocket, her options seemed bleak.

At age 22, she didn't know where to turn. She was kicked out of her home at 15, and her drug use and criminal behavior followed her from Bellingham to Oklahoma, where she fled to avoid warrants for her arrest.

"I was forging checks, stealing cars, doing meth, running with the wrong people," she recalled.

That's when she got the unexpected proposal that changed her life: her aunt and uncle in Union offered to send her an airline ticket to fly back to her native Northwest and create a new life in Mason County.

That was 20 years ago. These days, Fyfe is known for her popular coffee stand, Steph's Espresso, on Olympic Highway North in Shelton and her charitable work in the community. She remembers that when she was struggling, "I always had help ... a loaf of bread or a safe place to lay my head." She added, "People forget what humanity is."

CHILDHOOD IN THE SAN JUAN ISLANDS

Fyfe was born in Seattle and spent her first years in the Leschi and Madison Park neighborhoods. Her mother operated a day care and her father worked in construction.

At the end of her kindergarten year, Fyfe's family moved to Orcas Island. A year later, she moved with her mother and her mother's boyfriend to Waldron Island. There was no power on the 5-mile long island. Fyfe attended a one-room schoolhouse with 15 other children in kindergarten through the eighth grade.

Fyfe then moved back to Orcas Island, where she attended grades five through eight.

"Because of where we were, we had full rein ... We played outside, like kids," she said.

Fyfe moved to Bellingham at the end of her eighth-grade year. "That's where my troubles started," she recalled.

Fyfe started drinking alcohol and smoking pot. Fyfe's mother kicked

her out of the house, which put her on the streets at 15. Fyfe said she was a straight-A student, but the school expelled her because she no longer had an address.

Fyfe said she started working at a nursing home, where a co-worker let her sleep occasionally. Fyfe said she got arrested for breaking into her mother's house while she was gone, so she could grab some of her winter clothes. But Fyfe managed to earn her GED at age 16.

Fyfe got high on methamphetamine for the first time when she was 16.

"I was up for 3 1/2 half days," she said. "I was hanging out in Seattle. It completely changed me ... It was a very inexpensive high, so it was extremely easy to get hooked on."

Fyfe rented an apartment at 18 and enrolled at Bellingham Technical College. She earned a degree in cashier checking in nine months, and then a second degree in building, remodeling and welding. Her grandmother helped her buy a condo.

"In my mind, I was doing OK because I was moving forward ... but I was pretty much messed up," she said.

Fyfe said she went into drug treatment several times, but started using soon after being released.

"I didn't want to be clean and sober. This is easier."

But then her estranged father died, followed soon after by her beloved grandmother.

"She was my life force ... it sent me over the edge," Fyfe said. Her life, she said, spiraled into "complete and utter self-destruction."

Fyfe lost her condo. She was arrested for forging checks and credit cards. Facing possible jail time, she hitchhiked to Oklahoma City, in the only state where she could not be extradited back to Washington.

In Oklahoma City, Fyfe studied at an architecture school. She kept to herself and stayed clean. But the school lost its accreditation, she lost her money, and she turned to methamphetamine and heroin.

Fyfe was sentenced to 120 days in jail for possession of methamphetamine. She was 22 years old.

"It was hard," she remembered. "It

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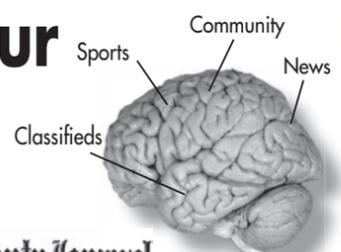
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Profile: Fyfe owns Steph's Espresso

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was a 13-story jail that housed thousands of people."

After being released, she returned to her "drug house." That was when her aunt sent her a letter saying her grandfather had died.

On Dec. 7, 1998, Fyfe stepped on an airplane to fly to Seattle, ready to face her family and her war-rants.

"I was in absolute fear," she said. "I knew I couldn't run."

On the drive to Union, Fyfe passed through downtown Shelton immediately following the annual Christmas parade. She remembers the sign that declared "Christmas Town USA."

"There's happy people walking and Christmas lights and normalcy ... complete night and day from where I had been," she said.

Fyfe worked for her uncle and aunt's dental implant business, Perio Institute; she retipped the tools. She turned herself in to authorities in Bellingham, and then returned to Oklahoma to complete 40 hours of community service. When she returned, she started working at the coffee stands Fifth Street and Purdy Canyon Espresso. At the

time, Mason County was home to 53 coffee stands, she noted.

In 1999, her aunt asked whether she wanted to partner with the couple and launch a coffee stand.

"I was absolutely dumbfounded," she said.

ESTABLISHING A BUSINESS

Steph's Espresso opened at its current site in September 1999. She rented an apartment in Shelton.

"I had no one idea what I was doing running a business," she said. Fyfe's aunt is an accountant, and she gave her direction.

The stand is near several schools, and organizations started asking for gift baskets and cards for fundraisers. Fyfe began sponsoring softball teams.

Twelve years ago, she launched her signature event: an Easter egg hunt on the ball fields at Oakland Bay Junior High School. At the inaugural hunt, she spread 9,000 plastic eggs bearing goodies on the field.

"The turnout was massive," she recalled.

In April, Fyfe and her volunteers spread 78,000 eggs on the fields. She says the event has gifted more than 1 million eggs.

The most rewarding part is "the kids, knowing that the kids have fun and it gives them something to do," Fyfe said. Fyfe is a single mother raising her 15-year-old son, Wesslee.

Fyfe also serves on the board of directors of the Mason General Hospital Foundation and the Miss Mason Area Scholarship Pageant.

"If everyone took an extra moment, it would be incredible what we could do as a community," she said.

Dee Depoe, manager of the Elma Timberland Library, has been a customer at Steph's Espresso for years. Fyfe employs people who might not get a chance elsewhere, she said.

"I like what she does, I like what she stands for, I like what she's done for the community," Depoe said.

Kati Little has worked at Steph's Espresso for 13 years.

"She's wonderful and caring," Little said. "She always has the best interests for the people and the community and her employees."

Little added, "I'm proud to work for such an amazing woman, and she's made a positive impact on me."

NONPROFIT BRIEFS

Hunters breakfasts served in Matlock

Matlock Grange No. 357 serves hunters breakfasts from 5:30 a.m. to noon Saturday and Sunday at 16 Beeville Road, Matlock.

1940's-style U.S.O. show at Shelton church

Shelton Presbyterian Church hosts a 1940s U.S.O. show at 7 p.m. Sunday at the church at 1430 Shelton Springs Road.

Donations will be accepted to help a local homeless teenager receive mentoring, a haircut and other services to help get a job.

Annual blessing of the animals in Hoodspport

Dogs, cats and other well-behaved pets on leashes or in cages are welcome at the annual blessing of the animals at 2 p.m. Sunday at St. Germain Episcopal Church, 600 Lake Cushman Road, Hoodspport. The event includes pet portraits, medals, certificates, treats and refreshments. Bring a donation for the local pet shelter.

■ Compiled by reporter Gordon Weeks

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