

Joel's Story

Shadows in Westerly

Joe's childhood began in Westerly, Rhode Island, in a small home filled with siblings, noise, and the unpredictable rhythm of hardship. Every Sunday, he sat in the same church pew alongside his two brothers and sister, listening to hymns that felt like both comfort and distance.

But inside, Joe carried a weight he didn't know how to name. He felt unseen—overshadowed by a brother whose presence seemed to command the room effortlessly. Joe often wondered where he fit, or if he fit at all. The house was loud, life was tough, and childhood didn't leave much room for gentle moments or affirmation.

Still, seeds of faith were planted early, tucked into his heart like small embers waiting for breath.

The Breaking Years

High school arrived like a storm. Joe faced challenge after challenge—too many responsibilities, too few safe spaces, and emotions that ran deeper than he knew how to handle.

It was during these years that he turned to alcohol. He was young—far too young—but it dulled what hurt. It helped him escape the shadows he felt trapped beneath. One poor decision folded into the next, shaping habits that would follow him into adulthood.

Yet even in those reckless years, God was not absent. Joe wouldn't realize it until much later, but the Lord was already working, shaping the contours of a compassion he himself did not yet understand.

Fire and Smoke

Adulthood came quickly, and with it, responsibility. Joe became a firefighter in Westerly, RI—an unexpected calling for a young man who once felt lost. But firefighting made sense to him. It was action, purpose, and courage all at once. It gave him direction and a way to fight for people who couldn't fight for themselves.

Running into burning buildings didn't scare him—he'd walked through worse flames inside his own heart.

Later, when he moved to Lempster, New Hampshire, he continued serving, continuing the calling that felt written into his bones: protect, rescue, stand in the gap.

The Calling in the Hard Places

Joe had been living in New Hampshire by the time he married. He entered that season with hope in his heart and a longing to build the kind of family he never had growing up. Together, he and his first wife welcomed two beautiful children—little lights that brought joy, purpose, and a fierce kind of love Joe didn't know he was capable of.

During those years, another unexpected door opened. Joe became a corrections officer in a Vermont prison. Most people would have run from that kind of work, but Joe stepped into it with confidence. Something about standing in the gap, guiding broken men, and bringing order into chaos resonated deeply with him. It felt less like a job and more like a calling. He was good at it—steady, fair, respected. In that harsh environment, he found a sense of purpose he hadn't felt anywhere else.

But even as he poured himself into fatherhood and work, unresolved wounds still lingered beneath the surface. The shadows of his past, the struggles he carried since childhood, and the quiet ache he never confronted began pressing into his marriage. Alcohol, once a way to cope with loneliness and insecurity, crept back into the corners of his life.

The strain grew heavier. Arguments deepened. Connection thinned. Until eventually, the marriage crumbled under the weight neither of them knew how to lift.

The divorce devastated Joe. Losing his marriage was painful, but the separation from his children tore something inside of him. He felt like he had failed the two people he loved more than anything. In the emptiness that followed, he drowned his sorrows the only way he knew at the time—trying to numb the grief, the guilt, the deep ache of absence.

He continued working as a corrections officer, still pouring out compassion and strength for others even as he struggled privately. The job remained a lifeline—a place where he could serve, protect, and feel needed—but it couldn't quiet the storm inside him.

In those silent, painful years, Joe didn't know it yet, but God was beginning the slow work of reconstruction. The foundation of his life had cracked, but it had not collapsed. Grace was moving—even through the heartbreak, even through the disappointment, even through the bottle.

New Hampshire became the ground where God would eventually begin restoring what was broken—piece by piece, step by step, one surrendered moment at a time.

Unexpected Grace

Three years after the divorce, when Joe had finally learned how to stand on steadier ground, grace arrived in a way he didn't anticipate. It didn't come crashing into his life with fireworks or grand gestures—it came softly, like a warm breeze after a long winter. Her name was Anna.

Their first conversations were simple, almost ordinary, but something about them felt different. Joe wasn't searching for love; he didn't believe he deserved it. But there was a gentleness in Anna that made him breathe a little deeper, a sincerity that let him lower walls he'd kept fortified for years. She didn't rush him, didn't push him—she simply saw him. Not the mistakes, not the broken chapters, but the man beneath them.

Neither of them expected what grew from that spark. What began as friendship—steady, unhurried—evolved into something deeply rooted. Love didn't sweep them off their feet; it unfolded like a sunrise, slow but undeniable. Joe discovered, almost to his surprise, that being truly known wasn't something to fear. In Anna's presence, he felt safe. In her laughter, he felt hope. In her compassion, he recognized a grace he had been longing for but never knew how to request.

Through their marriage, Joe found more than companionship—he found healing. Anna didn't mend his wounds for him, but she walked beside him as he let God do the work. She encouraged him when he stumbled, celebrated when he pushed through, and reminded him, again and again, that his story wasn't over. She believed in him long before he learned how to believe in himself.

With Anna, Joe discovered a purpose that reached beyond his own life. Their shared passion for ministry began to grow naturally—two people who had survived storms now offering shelter to others caught in the wind. Together, they learned what it meant to love with intention, to lead with humility, and to serve with compassion marked by experience.

Slowly, almost quietly, the shadows Joe had once lived under began to fade. The feelings of insignificance, the memories that used to haunt him, the self-doubt that clung to his ribs—they loosened their grip.

Love has a way of doing that.

It doesn't rewrite the past; it reframes it.

It doesn't remove the scars; it gives them meaning.

It doesn't erase the pain; it reveals the purpose beneath it.

Standing beside Anna, surrounded by the beautiful chaos of their blended family, Joe realized something extraordinary: every broken piece of his story had led him here. And for the first time, he felt not only redeemed—but chosen.

A Heart Restored

Today, Joe stands as an essential part of Heart of the Matter Ministries, but the man he is now didn't appear overnight. His compassion was carved through suffering; his strength forged in years of breaking and rebuilding. When he walks into a room, he carries the quiet authority of someone who has survived himself—someone who knows what it feels like to fall, and what it takes to rise again.

In ministry, Joe doesn't speak from theory; he speaks from testimony. He knows what it is to feel invisible, overshadowed, overlooked. He knows the shame of mistakes, the ache of separation, the weight of regret. He knows the long nights when prayer feels like it hits the ceiling, and the mornings when it's hard to believe change is possible. Because he has lived it, he recognizes that same look in the eyes of those who come to Heart of the Matter searching for hope. And he meets them with a gentleness that can only come from someone who once needed it himself.

Joe has become a steady presence—someone who listens without judgment, prays with sincerity, and meets people exactly where they are. His story gives him the discernment to see beyond behavior into the wounds beneath it. He knows that brokenness is rarely loud; it's often quiet, tucked behind forced smiles and polite answers. And he has a remarkable ability to draw out honesty simply by being honest himself.

His past—once heavy with pain, insecurity, and the loneliness of feeling unseen—has now become the very tool God uses to reach others. Instead of hiding his wounds, Joe holds them up as evidence: proof that grace restores, that God rewrites stories, that no one is too far gone. He tells people that healing doesn't always come quickly, but it comes. That redemption is not a moment but a journey. And that every journey is worth taking.

Through Heart of the Matter Ministries, Joe helps others find the same restoration he discovered in Christ. Whether he's serving behind the scenes, praying with someone at the altar, sharing his testimony, or offering a simple word of encouragement, his presence speaks loudly: **you matter, you're not alone, and God is not done with you.**

His life—once marked by struggle, shadows, and the constant feeling of not measuring up—now shines as a story of redemption. But not a polished, sanitized kind. It's the raw, real kind that carries scars and gratitude in equal measure. The kind that points every bit of glory back to God.

Joe's courage is not in pretending he has never fallen, but in showing others how he learned to stand. His strength is not in self-reliance, but in surrender. And his testimony is not about being perfect, but being found.

A man who once doubted his own worth now walks in purpose.

A man who once felt unseen now helps others feel known.

A man who once questioned God's presence now carries His love into every room he enters.

This is Joe's restored heart—steady, generous, redeemed. And through Heart of the Matter Ministries, that restoration continues to ripple outward, touching lives the way his own was transformed: slowly, tenderly, powerfully, by the unfailing grace of God.