

# KEEP SUCCESS

S T O R I E S

everyday people and their remarkable achievements

## Loretta Smallwood: Helping Hands to Healing Hands

*Loretta Smallwood never sought drama in her life. It always had a knack for finding her all on its own.*

The end of her 18-year marriage forced her into single-parent hood. Financial difficulties left her without a bed to sleep on. A terrible collision with a tractor-trailer truck injured her and nearly stopped her education dead in its tracks. Yet Loretta did more than merely survive those challenges; she emerged from them as a winner who was emboldened and empowered to succeed by the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) program.

Most days, Loretta bounds around barefoot in blue scrubs at Candlelight Therapeutic Massage, her massage studio in Corbin. Her lack of footwear is not excessive informality; it is a professional technique she learned at the Lexington Healing Arts Academy to keep her cool during strenuous massage sessions.

As she discusses how she became a licensed massage therapist at age 37, Loretta's enthusiasm is practically palpable. When she talks about having her own studio and the 50 clients she has treated there in only five months, her smiles and laughs provide a glimpse into her contentment.

"I went into this to help people, and hopefully—one day at a time, one person at a time, one touch at a time—we're going to change things and make them better," Loretta says.

Loretta's enthusiasm for her new career and business is matched only by her enthusiasm for the WIA. Loretta considers that workforce and training program to be the key that allowed her to unlock her potential and step into a new life that she never would have imagined was possible just two short years ago, when she held four jobs at one time in order to make ends meet.

"I flat-out tell people that the WIA was God-sent, as were the people that worked with me in the program," Loretta says. "Without the WIA I wouldn't be sitting here today, because I know that I couldn't have afforded to do what I've done."

What WIA did was cover the majority of her tuition, textbook and child-care costs, and provided funding for school-related transportation and meals. What Loretta did was nothing short of amazing.

With WIA support, Loretta overcame her hardships and successfully completed

what became a grueling 11-month, seven-day-per-week program at the Lexington Healing Arts Academy. Along the way, she participated in 500 hours of classroom work and 100 hours of hands-on clinical work. Loretta also became only the fourth student in the school's six-year history to earn a 100-percent ranking on her hands-on massage training.

Graduates from the academy—one of Kentucky's premier massage therapy schools—are certified to perform an array of therapeutic techniques including deep-tissue and relaxation massage, reflexology, and acupressure. All graduates also are officially licensed by the Kentucky Board of Licensure for Massage Therapy, which is a requirement for owning and operating a massage studio.

"It was the longest, shortest eleven months of my life," Loretta says with a laugh. "It has been a tremendous experience for me, and it has all been part of a journey that I wouldn't take anything for."

Loretta's journey began two years ago. Still smarting from her divorce, Loretta was working as a fitness technician at Manchester Memorial Hospital's fitness center, holding three smaller jobs, and searching for a new direction in her life. At that time, she had only performed massages on her children, who told her she was pretty good at it, she says.



Loretta Smallwood

“A friend asked if I had ever considered pursuing it as a career,” she says. “I noticed that I did do a lot with my hands, but I had never really thought about becoming a massage therapist.”

Loretta knew that a massage therapist visited Manchester Memorial Hospital twice each month to treat patients. Loretta met her and began quizzing her on how to start a career in massage therapy. Loretta says the two quickly bonded and—with selected patients’ permission—the therapist allowed Loretta to try her hand at therapeutic massage.

“Most of the clients thought it was her doing the massage,” Loretta says, “and I had no idea what I was really doing at that point. I was just doing a few things she had shown me.”

Encouraged by that response, Loretta began actively seeking schools that offered training in massage therapy. Although the Lexington Healing Arts Academy was nearly 100 miles from Manchester, Loretta felt it was her best option.

“It took me over a year to get in the school because they were so booked up,” she says. “Once they finally called me and said they had an opening, then I had to figure out how I could get financial help.”

A school administrator recommended Loretta check into the WIA

*“... the WIA was God-sent ...”*

program to see what services it might offer her. The recommendation led Loretta to the Daniel Boone Development Council (DBDC) community action agency in Manchester and to WIA Career Adviser JoAnn Nolan. The WIA program is provided in Clay County by the DBDC under contract with the Eastern Kentucky Concentrated Employment Program, Inc. (EKCEP), which administers the program in 23 eastern Kentucky counties.

“I knew Loretta wanted to do something with herself, but she couldn’t because she couldn’t get the assistance,” JoAnn says. “Once we got that worked out, I knew she definitely would succeed.”

WIA support allowed Loretta to drop her smaller jobs and keep only her hospital position after she began her training in January 2004. That job quickly slipped from being full-time to part-time, and finally to very-limited hours on an as-needed basis.

“I’d go to school in Lexington in the day while my daughter was in school, and I got back to Manchester about the time she got home from school every day,” Loretta says. “I went to the night shift at the hospital so I could work nights and take her with me.”

Her hands-on clinical training sometimes required her to turn around and drive back to Lexington as soon as she got home if clients called the school and requested that she work on them. Taking elective classes on Saturdays and Sundays turned her education into a seven-day-per-week venture.

Loretta’s life was hectic, but she says everything was working out perfectly. That all changed one morning in March. During her commute from Manchester to Lexington, a tractor-trailer truck collided with Loretta’s vehicle on the Hal Rogers Parkway, injuring her left arm and leg.

Because hospital policies prohibited Loretta from working injured, her largest source of income disappeared. Although she received some financial support from family to help with her bills, the WIA’s supportive services became her chief income as she struggled to keep attending classes.

“The WIA really was all I had,” Loretta says. “That support—instead of me looking at things like it was the end of the world—started looking to me like thousands of dollars. I knew I had to use it wisely, so that’s what I did.”

Loretta Smallwood stands next to her framed license from the Kentucky Board of Licensure for Massage Therapy, which hangs in the lobby of her Corbin massage studio. Loretta earned that license last November when she graduated from the Lexington Healing Arts Academy. The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) program provided funds she needed to complete the massage therapy course.

Loretta cut back on expenses and did away with frills like cable TV. JoAnn received special clearance to use WIA funds to help Loretta with a one-time payment of her car insurance to allow her to continue to drive to school.

Loretta says the academy initially suggested she withdraw and re-enroll after she recuperated. However, she was on the mend and insisted on doing whatever she could to keep going, even if that meant adding night classes to her already taxing schedule.

“I’d stay up many a night after I’d get my daughter in bed until 3 or 4 in the morning still doing my work,” she says. “But I turned everything in and got great grades on it all. I knew that I was three months into my training with only a few more months to go, and I had already come too far to give up on it.”

Her recovery from the accident made Loretta a complete believer in the healing potential of the therapeutic massage techniques she was learning. When she was in Lexington for her classes, the academy’s expert massage therapy instructors would treat her injured arm and leg. Loretta insists those treatments allowed her to heal and regain her strength at a pace that shocked everyone.

“In one week’s time, people could hardly tell I had been in an accident, let alone one where I was hit by a tractor-trailer,” she says. “Now, when someone walks in my shop and tells me they’ve been in an accident, I can look at them and tell them honestly that I can guarantee this will work, because I’ve been there and I know it does.”

Recuperating from the accident stretched the academy’s six-month course out to eleven months for Loretta, but she says she feels the worst of her trials are over.

“I definitely feel like I earned that thing,” Loretta says, pointing toward her framed state license that hangs in the lobby of

**Successful**  
T H O U G H T S

*“Opportunity dances with those who are already on the dance floor.”*

*— H. Jackson Brown, Jr.*

To share your WIA success stories in future issues of EKCEP Success Stories, contact Michael Cornett at EKCEP, 606-436-5751 or e-mail him at [mcornett@ekcep.org](mailto:mcornett@ekcep.org)

her studio. She says it serves as much more than a reminder of her accomplishments. It also gives her license to let go of her past difficulties and look confidently toward her future as a self-supporting, skilled professional and business owner.

That future would have been impossible to achieve without the WIA's help, she says.

"Thanks to WIA, I was able to do away with all of the negative junk in my life—day by day, one bit at a time—so I could focus on something that I really enjoy and pursue it," Loretta says. "The WIA got me here today, and I'll always be grateful." 🌐

For more than 35 years, EKCEP—the Eastern Kentucky Concentrated Employment Program, Inc.—has served 23 mountain counties in eastern Kentucky with workforce development, training, and employment programs to meet the region's changing needs.

EKCEP operates the JobSight network of workforce centers, where more than a dozen state and federal employment and training programs are gathered under one roof to meet the needs of eastern Kentucky's job seekers and employers.

EKCEP also administers programs that deliver tiered levels of services—including assistance with tuition and books—to adults, dislocated workers, and economically disadvantaged young people under the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA). Delivered through the JobSight network, these WIA programs use a wide variety of resources to help customers advance their careers.

For more information on what EKCEP'S WIA programs can do for you, visit [www.ekcep.org](http://www.ekcep.org), contact your local JobSight location, or e-mail EKCEP's central office at [ekcep@ekcep.org](mailto:ekcep@ekcep.org).

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