

PAST WINNERS OF THE VERMONT WOMEN'S FUND'S
HOLLY D. MILLER AWARD FOR VERMONT WOMEN & GIRLS

Cassie Hamel, Westfield

“I want to stand out! I want to be the best at whatever I choose to do.” Cassie’s potential is being fulfilled with the support of **Vermont Institutes’ Tech Savvy Girls**. Since her first year of high school, Cassie spent summers enrolled in the Tech Savvy Girls program at North Country High School. Her technical and leadership abilities were readily apparent. Quickly mastering basic computer skills, Cassie challenged herself with more demanding classes, including java programming. Sometimes, as is too often the case, Cassie was the only girl in her class.

Over the past four years, Cassie blossomed. She led workshops, worked as a camp counselor for a middle school and served as a moderator for the Tech Savvy Girls online community. “When I gave my first keynote address to over 300 teachers, I was nervous. Now, it’s easy and I do it a lot,” declares Cassie. This fall, she will be the first member of her family to attend college, where she will major in Management Information Systems. Through the doors Tech Savvy Girls helped to open, Cassie expanded her aspirations and recognized that not only are they conceivable, but achievable.

Rebecca (Becca) Shores, Manchester Center

Becca’s life was transformed last summer when she spent just two weeks at **Dorset Nursing Association’s Visions Camp**. Until camp, Becca preferred to be sedentary; her flexibility and balance were compromised and her willingness to participate in many new physical activities was limited. She arrived at camp somewhat unsure of both herself and her ability to participate in camp activities with the other girls. With the encouragement of the counselors and other campers, Becca tried many different and new activities, including cooking, sewing, boating, and dance. She shared with all the campers the exhilaration of trying something new - from threading a needle to make a pillow, to paddling a two-person kayak, to lip-synching on stage with the girls!

At a Visions Camp reunion party this winter, Becca announced that she had joined the soccer and basketball teams and was trying out for the school musical. She embraced the Visions Camp motto - “expand your vision of who you can become.” Becca emerged a more confident and physically active young woman.

Brandy Todd, Williamstown

At many junctures, Brandy’s life and the lives of her three children under age four, could have ended differently, if not tragically. Her husband physically and sexually abused her for years. Drugs and alcohol blurred the physical pain, but not the verbal abuse she and her children endured. Courageously, Brandy filed for divorce. Unfortunately, her hardships did not end there. In February 2003, Brandy was arrested for DWI, which compounded her financial and emotional woes. It was then that she was introduced to the services of **Have Justice Will Travel (HJWT)** and their **Women in Transition Life Skills and Mentoring Group (WIT)**.

HJWT and WIT provided Brandy with free legal services, in-home consultations and transportation. Additionally, HJWT directed Brandy to the social agencies she and her children desperately needed to rebuild their lives. Today, Brandy continues the community service required as restitution for her arrest by sharing her story of drug and alcohol addiction with local high school students. She is studying to become a paralegal at Woodbury College and has now come full circle with an internship at HJWT serving other survivors.

Nancy McKirryher, Rutland

Seeing her mother's struggle with osteoporosis and countless broken bones, Nancy was determined to stay active and build her strength. She enrolled in the **RSVP BoneBuilders Program** in Rutland a year after it opened. After three months, transformed by new-found energy and strength, she enrolled in training to become a BoneBuilders instructor herself. In the six years since then, Nancy has led BoneBuilders classes three times per week. She knows that she has improved her own bone density.

She also says that the students keep her going as much as she keeps them going. When one of her 85 year-old class participants fell at home and escaped with only bruises, she credited Nancy and the program with keeping her strong. With a family disposition toward osteoporosis, Nancy has transformed not only her life, but that of others in her community, and, in the process, has helped them to maintain their independence.

Grace Ross, Barre

Before addiction side-tracked her life, Grace had high hopes and great potential. She attended college at age 16 and became an electrician. Years later, much had changed and she was coming out of the Vermont prison system for the 8th time in four years. At that point, Grace was just the candidate envisioned for **Central Vermont Community Action Council's Family Housing Partnership Program**. The program focuses on the hardest to serve, those who have burned their bridges, exhausted all available resources and have no where else to turn. Her previous releases didn't include any pre-release planning or coordination with social services; she was released to Barre's Central Hotel, a haven for drug dealers. This was the place she was supposed to battle her own drug addiction, drug dealing and violent lifestyle.

As part of the Family Housing Partnership Program, *this* time things were different. With a roof over her head and lots of support, Grace could focus on her most grueling task: fighting the behaviors and addictions that were sabotaging her life. She got a job and learned how to live within a limited budget. She testified with passion before the Vermont Legislature about the state of substance abuse counseling and skill building within the prison system. And she has reconnected with her own talents: she is a member of the United Electrical Works Local 300; she has moved into her own home and has her two children back with her after a long time apart.

Robyn Neil, West Rupert

For Robyn Neil, 11, a 5th grader at Mettowee Community School, **Girls on the Run** has provided three years of fun, fitness and friendship. It has also given her much needed support since her mother died. "When my Mom died, Girls on the Run took my mind off everything. It was the place I could go to have fun and be with friends." The fitness program, which encourages elementary school girls to get active through daily running and activities, also gave her the strength to help her three siblings and her father. "I helped my dad stay on track so he wouldn't forget things. I also helped teach my brothers and sisters to get along so we could all spend time together without fighting." Robyn learned about Girls on the Run from her older sister and joined the program when she was in 3rd grade. Each year at the end of the program she and the other participants run a 5k race. "My first year I ran it in 46 minutes. Last year it only took me 30!" Robyn says "Girls on the Run is a good program because it helps me make friends, stay fit and stick to running as a sport."

Shelly Murphy, Williamstown

After 20 years in an emotionally and physically abusive relationship, Shelly Murphy took the giant step of leaving her marriage. With the support of **Safeline, Inc.** and her family, the 41 year-old mother of two has been able to start over and reclaim her life as a strong, independent woman. "I always considered family to be everything. I thought my kids needed both Mom and Dad, so I kept trying to make it work." Finally, last year, when her husband closed their joint account and cut Shelley off from the money she earned working three jobs, she decided it was time to stand up for herself.

"I was at rock bottom when I met the women at Safeline. They helped me through everything. I could call them at 2 am and they would be there for me." Nika, Sybilla and Judy helped her to obtain a "relief from abuse" order and start divorce proceedings. They provided her with a grant to get her car repaired and helped her find a fantastic new job at Gifford Medical Center. "They helped me when I didn't even have a bed. They offered me and my kids clothes, shoes, everything. They were there with hugs when I needed to cry." Because Shelly was so dedicated to keeping her family together, she needed a lot of support from Safeline to get through her feelings of embarrassment and shame. "I was so far down in the bottom of the pit, I didn't know how I would get through. But they were always there!" Shelly is now living with her mother and father who have supported her every step of the way. "Finally I see a light at the end of the tunnel. Sometimes it's very thin, but with the support of my family and Safeline, I keep coming back."

Brittney DeKalb, West Pawlet

Brittany DeKalb is a vivacious 12 year old who loves to run. Though Brittany has struggled with obesity all her life, she hasn't let it hold her back from fun on the run. Last year she joined her Mettowee Community School's **Girls on the Run** program and it has changed her life in ways she never imagined. "I learned it's not about how fast you run, it's about not giving up," she explains. At the end of the program last year, Brittany ran in and finished her first 5k race. When she crossed the finish line, she was greeted by a cheering crowd and had her picture snapped for the front page of her local paper. "Girls can change," she says. I used to tell people to get lost and got angry at my brothers, but no more." Because of Girls on the Run, Brittany knows what it feels like to be a real winner.

Jessica Morse-Demons,

Jessica Morse-Demons never intended to end up homeless, but she counts herself lucky for the time she and her four children spent in the **North Bennington Coalition for the Homeless "Housing Matters" program**. "I didn't want to go there because I'd heard a lot of stories about those places, but I was treated like family." Jessica arrived at the 6 Bank Street Transitional Shelter after all other support failed. She had left her abusive husband and moved in with her mother in rural Florida. When her mother moved and took the car, Jessica was stranded with no way to get to work or even to the grocery store 23 miles away.

Eventually she made her way back north to Bennington where she'd grown up and where her brother still lived. When housing with him fell through, she was forced to move into the shelter. Once there, however, she took full advantage of the three month "Housing Matters" program that helps homeless families learn the fundamentals of household care, budgeting, and other essential life skills. With support of the shelter staff, she went back to school and is on her way to getting her high school diploma at last. She found a good job and eventually transitioned into her own apartment—a permanent home for her family. The staff helped her buy furniture, get a car loan and still provides support when she needs it. "These people really care about the people they help, like me and my kids. I'm really proud they have a place like this in North Bennington."