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Mary's Miracle

Fleeing Domestic
Violence, Mary Jarreau
and Her Children
Discovered the Sweet
Life in a Candy Shop
in Wellsboro

By Maggie Barnes

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Christmas on Main Street
Vinyl Lives

DECEMBER 2017



Mary's Miracle

Fleeing Domestic Violence, Mary Jarreau and Her Children Discovered the Sweet Life in a Candy Shop in Wellsboro

By Maggie Barnes

Mary Jarreau was bathed in the late-day autumn sun as she chatted outside Peggy's Candies, her Main Street, Wellsboro, candy shop. Her twelve-year-old daughter, Emily, popped out of the store and said, "Mom, I'm dying for a hot dog." Mary's youthful face, framed by dark hair, split into a smile.

"Okay."

With that, Emily skipped down the sidewalk of the borough's main thoroughfare and out of her mother's sight. Mary, without another glance down the street, resumed her conversation.

There was a time, not very long ago, when such a moment would have been unthinkable in Mary's life.

"How does it feel to not fear for your family's safety?" she is asked. Again, the smile.

"It's wonderful."

How did she get from a time of stress, uncertainty, worry, and near panic to this place of tranquility and gratitude? She shares her story, Mary says, so that people can appreciate what she calls, "the magnitude of the miracle" that brought her to Wellsboro. Well, it is

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Ladies of the sweet life: (from left) Annie Jarreau, Heather Geer, Mary Jarreau, and Emily Jarreau share in the success and comfort of a new life and new opportunities.

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December, and if the world is ever to believe in miracles...

"It's over in the morning."

Mary heard her husband say those words and knew she was in desperate trouble. The marriage had never been good. But, her husband's abusive treatment and fits of violence were on a path of escalation that grew in Mary fresh fear for herself and the two children still living at home. Following through on that fear, Mary had arranged for divorce proceedings to begin. Her husband would be served with papers at his workplace the next day. She planned to be long gone from their Union County, Pennsylvania, home with her daughters by then. But her husband's paranoia shifted the balance of power back in his favor. He went through her purse and discovered a missing check, despite Mary's extra precaution of taking the last check in the book to hide her action.

"He knew how many checks should be in the book," Mary remembers. "It was the one I used to retain an attorney." The rest of that tense night was spent trying to talk him out of his growing anger. Mary laid down on

the bed with him in an effort to keep him calm. Two weapons were nearby, with him in control of both. Two young daughters slept just down the hall.

"All I could think of was 'stay alive. Think of some way to get out of this,'" Mary says.

Her narrative is broken when she greets a shopper with a dazzling smile and, for a moment, you are snapped back to the present, where Mary is happy and perfectly at peace. The contrast is jarring, and equally jarring as her story resumes.

"He had said that morning would bring the end. I knew the alarm was minutes away from ringing." A break in his attention was the chance she was waiting for; Mary out-manuevered her husband and got into a room with the weapons, her daughters, and a phone. The rest of the episode unfolds with the arrival of police and the fleeing of her husband.

"We never really saw him again," Mary says, adding that she was eventually awarded full custody of the girls. But before he left their lives, her husband took half of the couple's money and left a good chunk of the rest tied up in legal issues. She was safe.

But she was also broke and facing a very uncertain future.

At the time, Mary worked in sales. She enjoyed the work and was good enough at it to win three trips from her employer. But the job didn't pay what she needed to make ends meet as a solo parent. In fact, of the trips she won, she sold one back to the company for the cash and gifted the second to one of her daughters as the only wedding present she could afford.

That left a weekend trip to Niagara Falls.

Mary had been to the falls once before, with her husband, but the trip had been a nightmare of stress and tense moments. She barely remembered seeing the majestic landmark. This was another chance, but she was a year into trying to hang on to her home and keep things steady for her kids. The last thing she needed was to go out of town. A friend insisted otherwise. Time away was exactly what she needed to clear her head and clarify her thinking.

This time, Mary really saw—and felt—the falls.

"That thundering in your chest when

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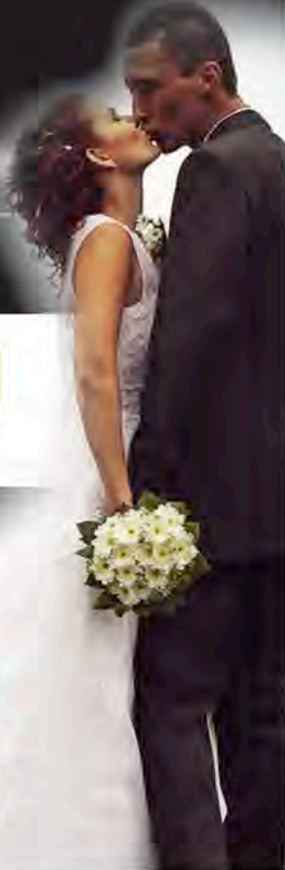
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you stand there—it was magical. I loved it."

The prize included all the classic Niagara Falls activities: Cave of the Winds, Maid of the Mist, and a taste of the famous regional fudge.

"I wanted to bring some fudge back for the kids, but it was too warm to travel all that way with it," Mary recalls. "So, on the drive home, we stopped in Wellsboro."

You see, there was this candy store... Mary felt an instant peace when she walked Main Street. It was as if all the serenity she had been missing in her life was stored here, in one community, waiting for her to claim it.

"I loved Peggy's Candies, so cozy and welcoming," she says. "We got some treats and walked further down the street. There was a real estate office." Mary turns and points, just a few doors away from where she sits, the smile on her face serving as a preview of things to come. For that day, there, in the window, was a flier advertising the fact that the candy store was for sale. Mary was suddenly rooted to the sidewalk.

"That thundering was back in my chest. The same feeling," she says.

Now, given her financial situation at the time, it was beyond ridiculous to think of buying a business. But the roaring in her ears persisted. "I felt...what? Purposeful maybe. Like there was a specific reason I was supposed to be standing there. But, it was nothing that made sense."

Regardless of the illogic, she snapped a photo of the flier. Back at her job, Mary tried to forget about Wellsboro, about the perfect little shop, about the thundering in her chest. But she couldn't.

"It just wouldn't let go of me. I needed to dream."

People often don't recognize the most significant moments in their life while they are happening. But, sometimes, the fork in the road is large, looming, and loud. Mary knew that to stay where she was would lead to losing the house and probable bankruptcy. Door Number Two led only to the thirteen dollars in her checking account. But Mary is a woman of a resolute faith. Even during the turbulent days when her very safety was threatened, she clung to the belief that all would be well. She called the real estate agent. It is a measure of the kind of place Wellsboro is that the agent didn't question Mary's sanity just before hanging up.

"He heard me out," Mary says. "He was more encouraging than the facts should have warranted. He said to make an offer and see what happened."

The first domino had been tipped and the wheels of the universe began to spin in Mary's favor for the first time in decades. One phone call led to another, and to a conversation, and to the right people being contacted. Ebenezer Scrooge probably would not have signed off on the deal that followed, but practicality has no place in a December miracle. All that matters is that when the wheels stopped spinning Mary was the owner of the most perfect little candy shop in the Commonwealth.

It was a year ago, very near the shop's thirtieth anniversary.

Mary had worked in catering and had been a florist, but she had no depth of experience in retail, and all she knew about candy was that she liked it. She was going to need help, and she started with her youngest kids. Soon, Annie, now fifteen, and Emily, the twelve-year-old hot dog lover, found themselves standing in front of Peggy's Candies with their mother. They were more than a little confused.

"She had been acting weird lately," says Emily, with the bluntness characteristic of that age. "And she was bringing home lots of movies about candy." The movie night playlist in the Jarreau home had become a sugar-laden homage to sweetness: *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, *Chocolat*, and the like. "But, is that the strangest thing my Mom has ever done?" Emily gives an exaggerated eye roll. "Hardly."

Still, looking through the storefront windows, the kids were unsure why they were there, asking, "Are we going in here?" Mary remembers that she took a breath that started in her toes.

"We own it." She told the girls that it was time for them to step out of the shadows and do more than just survive. "I told them that we were meant for more than just being humiliated and struggling. I believe we could make a contribution to the right community. And I knew, I *knew* Wellsboro was that place." The girls were in, and the older kids, Heather, Caroline, and Joshua, offered their endorsement as well.

Getting the store was a big check mark on the to-do list, but Mary was still facing a hefty commute to work in Wellsboro while she hunted up a place to live. Then it

happened again. The owner of the building Peggy's Candies is in had a house on the market. Maybe it was something that would work for the town's newest family? Mary shakes her head at the memory. "We do not deserve the kindness we've been shown here."

Mary loved the shop as it was when she became the owner, so she moved cautiously in the first months. She didn't want to make sudden changes and damage the affectionate relationship Wellsboro had with its confectionery. They did some renovating, but nothing too drastic. Mary tweaked the offerings a bit, for instance removing roasted nuts until they can perfect a system for keeping them fresh. But the dime store sweets beloved from childhood are still there—the licorice, the button candy, the fireballs, all available in abundant quantity in bins. The fudge is still homemade and the Jarreau family has found a recipe for salted caramel that meets with their approval.

"I wanted more flavors of ice cream and that meant another freezer case. I contacted Hershey's and they were skeptical they could get one to me, but..." Mary flashes that

smile and it's as if you can hear the Good Ship Karma steaming into port. Want more than thirty kinds of ice cream? Check in the gleaming, side-by-side cases.

So, what does the community think of the new setup?

"She is a dream business owner," gushes Julie Van Ness, director of the Wellsboro Area Chamber of Commerce. "Mary has a great spirit and energy. Her store is uplifting. That's the best word for it."

Asked how well Mary and her family have fit into the area, Wellsboro Home Page vice president Sara Vogt pauses on the sidewalk in front of Peggy's.

"See this block of cement in the sidewalk? See how well it fits in those lines? How perfect it looks next to this block? That's how Mary and her girls have fit into this town. Hard to think she hasn't always been here."

Fudge and bubble gum are wonderful, but Mary and her family see Peggy's Candies as being more than just a sweet spot on a sweet Main Street.

"I want to support the community that has done so much for me and my children,"

she says. "I want to use the shop to give hope to others." Highland Chocolates of Wellsboro, whose workforce is comprised of individuals with some disabilities, was invited to join the Peggy's Candies products. Each month a local non-profit is selected to receive some of the shop's proceeds. Mary's story has traveled as many miles as she has and she has heard from dozens of women who are in abusive relationships, or just free of one and unsure as to what the future holds for them. She takes seriously her obligation to serve as a role model.

"Helping other women is a way of making payment on the miracle that brought me here," she says. Peggy's has sponsored a self-defense course for women, and Mary is often on the phone relating to someone in Georgia, for instance, that she got out and they can too. "My experience is one of survival, of moving from devastated to empowered. We're not getting rich, that's for sure. We pay the bills, still it's more of a 'daily bread' sort of business. But, my daughters have seen first-hand that you can rise from the ashes. You can save yourself."

Speaking of bread, the blessings didn't stop with the space where Peggy's Candies

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resides. Mary had been eyeing the neighboring storefront as a possible bakery location. The jewelry store was closing. The right words fell in the right ear and, after a little creative arranging of ones and zeros, Mary had her bakery. She has a tearoom in the bakery, a homey spot in the back named for Mary Wells, where you can sip a cup and share a scone. She wants to encourage children to read and color and show off their journalistic talents, and is working to create a makeshift news studio in the front window. She wants to offer a safe haven of positive thought and encouragement.

Her daughters have blossomed in the embrace of Wellsboro. School, friends, all the important pieces are solidly in place. "Everyone is so nice," Emily states with great conviction, "it's like, almost not real." She's too young to have known Mayberry, but she understands the reference. "Yeah, like that!"

Some people would look at how the stars have aligned on every step of this family's journey to Wellsboro and say, "It's nice

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Candid confections: Mary displays some of the candies that drew her to Wellsboro.

that something good happened for them.” Others would call it “luck.” Those pesky cynics would say that random things happen to random people.

Remember how Mary describes it? “The magnitude of the miracle” were her words. If faith is to be believed, more than 2,000 years ago a small family wandered in search of a safe place to stay. Theirs was a message of hope, of acceptance, of finding a place to live and love in peace.

No, there isn't a manger in Wellsboro, and the stars that shine above here are the same ones that shine everywhere. And are there problems here? Yes, of course, only a fool would tell you otherwise. But isn't your heart gladdened to know that in this town sits a candy store, owned by a woman who sees the miracle in every day of ordinary life? What could be sweeter than that?

Maggie Barnes has won an IRMA and two Keystone Press Awards for her columns in Mountain Home. She lives in Waverly, New York.

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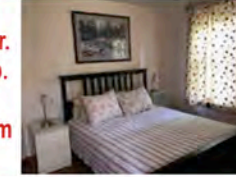
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