

PAPER BOAT MEDIA

January often marks the season of fresh starts and bold resolutions. New Year, New Me, right? With that in mind, I thought there was no one more fitting to kick off 2025 as our very first Person of the Week than Katherine Russell.

What do The Lord of the Rings, Star Wars, The Matrix, Harry Potter, The Lion King, and our Person of the Week, Katherine Russell, all have in common? They each embody the timeless narrative arc known as the Hero's Journey. This classic storytelling framework follows a protagonist who ventures into the unknown, confronts failure, difficult trials and challenges, experiences profound personal growth, and becomes transformed. But here's the twist: Katherine's journey isn't scripted or fictional—it's a living, breathing testament to resilience, courage, and transformation. Her story is as real and inspiring as it gets.



At 28, her life took an unimaginable turn. In August 2008, a routine drive became a nightmare when a work van lost its ladder on the highway. The resulting crash was catastrophic. Her vehicle flipped nine times, leaving her body shattered and her world forever changed.

She spent months in a coma, awakening to a stark reality: three brain surgeries, spinal surgery, a reconstructed foot, and almost every bone on her right side broken. The woman who emerged from that hospital bed bore little resemblance to the one who had entered it.

Before the accident, she didn't drink or use drugs. She was educated, successful, and grounded in a high-paying job. But the aftermath of her injuries brought something else—a prescription for powerful narcotic painkillers. What began as relief for excruciating physical pain soon became the quiet undertow that pulled her into addiction. Addiction swept through her life like a storm. It took everything—her home, her children, her freedom, her family, and every possession she once held dear. She hit bottom when she lost her second husband, a heartbreak that forced her to confront the stark reality of her situation.

Getting clean wasn't just a decision—it was a fight for survival. The woman who had once thrived was now unrecognizable, not only to others but to herself. Addiction had rewritten her life story, altering every fiber of her being. Yet, somewhere within, a flicker of determination remained.

Through Narcotics Anonymous meetings, step work, and outside support, she began to rebuild. Early recovery wasn't just hard—it felt insurmountable. The damage was so vast, the pieces so scattered, that putting them back together seemed impossible.

But she did it. And in doing so, she found a purpose: to help others navigating those early months of recovery. Her journey isn't just a story of survival; it's one of transformation. Today, she stands as proof that even from the darkest moments, a new life can emerge. And she's dedicated to making that possibility real for others. That's why she founded Foundations to Freedom—to create a lifeline for anyone ready to step out of addiction and into a life of recovery.

Foundations shines as a guiding light for individuals navigating the difficult path of recovery from substance abuse disorders. Its mission is deeply compassionate: to provide a sanctuary—a safe, structured, and supportive environment where hope takes root, personal growth flourishes, and civic responsibility becomes a cornerstone of a new life. With an unwavering focus on dignity and holistic care, Foundations offers wrap-around services like skills training, employment assistance, and mental and medical support. Through these efforts, Katherine has witnessed profound transformations in those who come seeking help.

During our conversation, Katherine and I discussed that recovery rarely begins at a high point. Addiction, with its indiscriminate nature, does not care about one's background, accomplishments, or station in life. The foundation has supported countless individuals from all walks of life—whether they are teenagers battling their first taste of dependency, business owners whose success couldn't shield them, doctors, professors, or military personnel. Addiction can seize anyone, regardless of their achievements or identity. It arrives unbidden, without warning, and without regard to who you are or where you've been.

At its heart, Foundations is more than a nonprofit; it is a lifeline, equipping individuals with the tools they need to lead drug-free, meaningful, and productive lives. It does so not just by opening its doors but by extending a genuine helping hand, embodying a steadfast commitment to renewal and second chances for all who earnestly seek them. Katherine's words resonate with profound clarity: in her darkest moments, she felt abandoned, having pushed away everyone who cared. Yet, in recovery, she realized a fundamental truth: success hinges on the belief that one is loved and valued simply for being human. "People need to know they matter," she says. "That they're worth saving, no matter what."

A Buddhist saying echoes this sentiment: "I love you, unconditionally—your actions are irrelevant." This ethos permeates Katherine's work at Foundations to Freedom, where compassion and care transform lives.

While the relentless tide of addiction may feel overwhelming, Katherine stands firm, making a difference one life at a time. Each story of recovery she helps foster is a testament to the enduring power of hope, humanity, and the belief that every person is deserving of love and a chance to rebuild.

When I spoke with Katherine, she shared stories that were as heartbreaking as they were inspiring—stories of individuals who had been pulled into the darkest depths of addiction, some falling victim to sex trafficking, others losing their families, and even lives tragically cut short. Yet, through the extraordinary work of her organization, many of these stories took a turn for the better.

What was once a devastating narrative became a chapter of resilience and renewal. Families torn apart by addiction have been reunited - children removed from unstable homes have found their way back to parents who have turned their lives around. Individuals who once struggled with shame and hopelessness have discovered dignity, steady employment, and, most importantly, a renewed sense of self-worth and humanity.

Katherine's organization operates multiple sober houses in our DeLand community and surrounding areas, offering sanctuary and support to those in need. Their efforts extend to single mothers, parents and children escaping domestic abuse, single fathers, and countless others navigating the complexities of addiction. These homes are not just places of recovery—they are epicenters of hope and transformation, radiating positive change throughout the town and beyond.

For those who feel moved to contribute, there are many ways to support this vital work. You can donate- any amount helps, you can sponsor a client or program, you can volunteer your time, participate in their charity fundraisers, or explore other opportunities to help.

But Katherine is not one to pause and admire her accomplishments. She is relentless in her mission, driven by an unshakable belief that no one is beyond the possibility of recovery. "Anyone who desires it and is willing to put in the work can be free from the obsession to use and live a drug-free life," she said. "Recovery is possible, and the pain addiction brings to individuals and their families can be overcome."

Her organization's success speaks for itself, with higher-than-average graduation rates and impressively low recidivism. Other counties and towns have taken notice and are partnering with her to expand her services and reach even more people in need.

When I asked Katherine if she had any hobbies or interests beyond her work, her voice, already warm and professional, brightened with genuine joy. She shared that her true passions are deeply rooted in her family, where her heart finds its fullest expression. With unwavering love and support from her husband, Matt, a beautifully blended family, and the addition of a new grandchild, her happiest moments are spent surrounded by loved ones, creating memories that remind her of the incredible strength and importance of connection and love.

Let's reflect on the true essence of a hero's journey—overcoming challenges, inspiring others, and leaving a meaningful mark. Katherine embodies all of this and more, making her the undeniable choice for our Person of the Week.

Congratulations, Katherine, on this well-deserved recognition!