

## This month Balance profiles: Shelly Johnson, director of Alcohol and Drug Services of Gallatin County

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By Jenna Caplette

When Shelly Johnson took a part-time job at Alcohol and Drug Services of Gallatin County 20 years ago, she never thought she was beginning a career path that would lead her through almost every job in the agency. Now she's the director. Deceptively soft-spoken, Johnson has an impressive professional vocabulary and an intimate knowledge of the gifts and challenges of the work that has chosen her.



Thomas Lee

Housed in Bozeman's Farm Bureau Building, Alcohol and Drug Services is a non-profit organization. The staff of 19 provides prevention, education, evaluation and treatment for chemical dependency. Working with alcoholics and addicts, many of whom have mental illness as well, is complex and challenging. "People can get fried in this work," Johnson says.

On Tuesdays, court-referred Driving Under the Influence (DUI) offenders sign up for their required class. That means up to 30 new clients, each with their own set of personal problems. Johnson says, "We're dealing with so many issues, alcohol as well as all the different drugs. We're always trying to find something that works for each person."

Being an effective advocate for clients involves Johnson traveling to Helena to work on statewide and national initiatives designed to improve the quality of care, and to reduce relapse and recidivism. "I like being part of a change, a change for the better."

Locally, Johnson collaborates with multiple agencies and services "because we're all seeing the same person and we're all trying to treat the whole person. It involves everyone working together."

She says, "Alcohol use impacts the whole family. Meth is a devastating drug, but alcohol is equally devastating." Showing up for people dealing with substance misuse issues and their families takes commitment. So does holding her own as an advocate for recovery, for "keeping the focus on the disease, that substance abuse and addiction aren't moral issues. We can't just put everyone in jail for alcohol and drug problems. There have to be alternatives."

Johnson navigates the criminal justice system, the ebb and flow of public interest and opinion, works to find and keep quality staff, all on a shoestring budget. What keeps her on the job? "When I start something, I want to finish it. I'm pretty passionate about that." Even more, "I enjoy it when someone comes in whom I haven't seen for a long while and is doing well in life and sobriety."

**BALANCE:** What do you consider your greatest strength?

**SJ:** Compassion and courage.

**BALANCE:** What do you consider your greatest weakness?

**SJ:** Too much compassion. With some people, I never give up.

**BALANCE:** Who are your heroes/role models?

**SJ:** My mom. Again, a woman with courage. She raised five kids and my dad was gone working a lot. She had a tight budget and we built our own house. She did odd jobs and stuff. She's a wonderful person. And, Jim Beckman, who was the director at ASDGC when I first worked there. I learned a lot from him.

**BALANCE:** What's your favorite book?

**SJ:** *Follow the River*. It's the story of a white woman captured by Shawnee in the Virginia Territory. She escapes and follows a river home, has a lot of courage. When I think about it, a lot of what I read is about women and courage.

**BALANCE:** What is the key to balancing your roles in personal, family, career and health matters?

**SJ:** I work out a lot, building strength and endurance, trying to be healthy, to take care of myself. I always set aside time with my husband, Britt, so we can have a good relationship. Saturday is date day for us.

**BALANCE:** What is the best advice you ever used?

**SJ:** Let go and let God. In the business I'm in, you have to let go. It's hard but it's so important too.

**BALANCE:** What's your dream job?

**SJ:** Having a ranch where people could come, taking them on hikes and horse back riding. Having fun with them. I wouldn't want visitors all of the time, though.

**BALANCE:** What do you most want to change about yourself?

**SJ:** As I get older, I sometimes want to change the way I look.

**BALANCE:** What do you most love about yourself?

**SJ:** My compassion, being able to understand when someone is having a hard time, not being judgmental but listening compassionately.

**BALANCE:** What do you do to relax?

**SJ:** I read or exercise. In the summer I hike or ride my Harley, sit on the back of the bike while Britt is driving. I like to do artwork like painting, and I do bead work. I love art.