A Teaching Story …

Sara’s Story of HOPE

… The Dignity of a Chance

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Sara feels like she is losing the dream she used to have, a dream for a better life. Her life has been hard.

Most days, Sara feels discouraged and alone. She worries about the future. Like other women in her situation, Sara needs to find work so she can support herself. She feels like she is running out of time.
One day, Sara sees a poster for the HOPE Business Program. It is a program for women who want to learn how to start and grow a respectable business using a talent they have or a trade they may have been taught.

The poster says that the program also teaches about Jesus and the hope that can only be found in Him. A program leader named Shelly teaches the class.

Starting a business? Jesus? Sara does not think any of this is for her, but something tells her to look into it anyway.
Shelly introduces herself and warmly welcomes everyone. She tells the women that if they want to be a part of HOPE, they need to have a good idea in mind for a business—to start or grow. She helps them think of some. Sara is not sure she wants to be here. She watches from where she is standing at the back of the class. She has no idea what she could do.

Just then, an idea pops into her mind. Since she already works in the kitchen where she lives, and she knows how to make bread, maybe she could start a business making bread to sell.

A seed of hope slips into her heart. She decides to stay for the rest of the class.
Shelly explains that women can apply for a business loan only if they show they are hardworking and responsible. They must make a commitment to attend every class, be on time, and always do their homework.

The women who are approved for loans will become known as a “HOPE Group.” They will continue meeting and learning together until their loans and loan fees are fully repaid.

Shelly talks to them about the importance of having hope in their lives. She says that one of the first steps in starting or growing a business is to keep a positive picture of it in your mind—a BIG HOPE.
It is hard for Sara to imagine having hope in anything—or anyone—but something inside tells her to keep listening.

Shelly goes on to say that once they have a BIG HOPE, then they need a plan to make it happen—a business plan. The classes will teach them about the business planning process, along with other important lessons about starting and growing a business—one that is successful, respectable, and different.

Each week, a Bible lesson will be taught as a part of every class. The Bible lessons teach about God and focus on character qualities that are important in business—and in life.
Several of the women decide to sign up, but others think it sounds like too big a commitment and too much work. One woman thinks her life will never be any better, no matter what she does.

Sara knows that feeling.

However, she decides to give the HOPE program a try—maybe even her best try.
Sara surprises herself at work in the kitchen the next day.

Without having planned to, she talks to the cook about HOPE. She asks the cook if she could use the kitchen for baking bread to sell, in exchange for working extra hours.

The cook thinks about it. She tells Sara she likes the idea. Sara is amazed. She just took a step toward her BIG HOPE, one she did not even know she had!
The next day in class, Shelly talks about what it means to run an honest business. She talks about the importance of becoming a person of integrity in all aspects of their lives. Sara listens to this and thinks about how different that would be from the life she has lived so far.

Sara also listens carefully when Shelly teaches them about the business planning process. She learns about making a profit, keeping good business records, preparation, and planning—a lot of planning.

It has been a long time since Sara has worked this hard at trying to learn anything, and it feels good!
Sara has an important homework assignment. She must talk to people and find out what businesses are needed in her community. She also needs to find out what makes one different from or better than another.

She does not know where to start, so once again she talks to the cook. The cook is happy to help and invites Sara to go to the marketplace with her.

Sara wants to learn as much as she can about business, so she talks to several people at the market. She learns that people like businesses that are honest and sell good-quality products. They also want to be treated with courtesy and respect as customers.
While at the market, Sara finds out that there is only one other person selling bread—and it is not very fresh. The cook says that must be why so many people come to her kitchen door asking to buy bread.

Sara has an idea! She asks the cook if she could start selling her own bread at the back door during the extra hours she works in the kitchen. The cook thinks about it and agrees. Sara surprises herself and gives the cook a hug.

Sara has a lot to do. She needs to learn how much it costs to make a loaf of bread, how much money to charge for it, and how many loaves she must sell to make a profit. She starts writing her ideas down so she can share them with her class.
At the next meeting, each woman is ready to present her BIG HOPE.

When it is Sara’s turn, she stands in front and faces the class. She takes a deep breath and tells them that her BIG HOPE is to have a chance for a better life by building a respectable business that sells the best bread at the best prices to happy customers. She goes on to tell them why her business is needed, how it would be different from others, and how she will let people know about it. She also tells them the steps she is taking toward this vision, and some ideas about how much it will cost to get her business started.

When she sits down she has a smile on her face. She has hope—and she has a voice!
The classes continue. The women learn more about business while they wait to hear if they are approved for a loan.

The Bible lessons continue as well. Shelly tells them more about Jesus and His great love for them. It is hard for Sara to imagine anyone loving her like that. Shelly says that Jesus has a hope and a plan for each of their lives, and that He even knows them by name. Sara longs to believe that.

Shelly encourages the women to pray for their business and for each other. She prays for them at every class. Sara realizes that a small seed of hope is growing in her—a hope for a different life—a hope for a better life—a hope that someday she might know Jesus.
Sara keeps picturing her BIG HOPE just like Shelly told her to do. At the same time, Sara is not just wishing for her BIG HOPE to happen—she diligently works to make it happen.

In addition to working extra hours in the kitchen and keeping up with her homework, Sara learns all she can about the bread business. She even visits bakers and local shop-owners in town. What she likes best is learning from the cook when they try new recipes together.

Sara smiles and thinks about the cook when Shelly talks to them about the importance of showing respect to others. Sara has great respect for the cook, and she shows her this respect by being courteous, being on time, and making sure she does her very best job when she is working for her.
Finally, Shelly gets the news. All but two of the women have been approved for loans! The ones who were approved attended all of the classes. They did all of their homework. They spent time learning about the kind of businesses they want to start and grow. They have been trying to live out the honorable character qualities they are learning in their Bible lessons.

Sara’s heart is full as the loan money is counted into her hand.

She feels proud. The other women feel it, too. You can see it on their faces! They are grateful to have been given a chance—a chance to grow a business while also having a chance to grow themselves.
Shelly tells them that they are now a “HOPE Group”! Sara thinks what a happy day it will be when she repays the money she is borrowing. She knows she can do it and is ready to persevere, even when times might be tough.

When they receive their loans, all the women sign a paper saying that they are responsible for repaying their own loans as well as for helping other women in the group repay theirs, if needed.

They also sign their names to show they agree on the rules and guidelines for their group. They commit to be accountable to each other. Shelly has talked to them about the importance of signing their names and the commitment they make when they do.

Each woman puts some of her loan money aside to start her own savings account. They are ready to get going and make their business plans happen!
Some of the women decide to start a business together. They call it a co-op. Some want to grow a business they already have. Sara wants to start her own business.

Using her loan money, she buys the supplies she needs to start baking her bread. She takes great care to be trustworthy and responsible with her loan money, and she only buys what she needs.

Sara also takes care to follow the rules of the HOPE Group. She helps and encourages the other women. She does her homework. She arrives at the weekly meetings on time, listens well, asks questions, participates, and stays to the end of every class. She is doing all she can to use the tools she is being given to build a business and improve her life. Sara has never worked this hard at anything.

Shelly has talked to them about the word empowerment. Sara thinks that perhaps this is what empowerment feels like!
Even though Sara is proud of all she is learning, she still finds it hard to understand all she needs to know about keeping good financial records. She continues to work on it but ends up asking Shelly for extra help.

When they are together, she also asks Shelly to tell her more about Jesus. Shelly reminds Sara of His great love for her, and that He died on the cross to save her. She explains to Sara that if she wants to ask Jesus into her heart she needs to ask Him to forgive her sins. Sara bows her head in prayer. She asks Jesus to come into her life, to forgive her, and to guide her. She looks up at Shelly with tears in her eyes—happy tears.
At the next class, Shelly teaches them about marketing and gives them a homework assignment to make a marketing plan to grow their businesses. When Sara finishes her plan, she puts up signs to let people know about her bread business. She designs signs that are creative and get people’s attention. The sign she likes the most now proudly hangs at the back door of the kitchen.

Sara continues with her marketing plan by asking the women to tell others about her bread business, and she offers a free loaf of bread to any woman who sends her a new customer.

Sara has an idea, gathers her courage, and takes free bread samples to the owner of the local market. He tastes her bread and agrees to sell it for her.

She thanks Jesus for giving her courage. She realizes that she has started holding her head up higher.
The next day, the man at the market tells her that her first loaf of bread has sold. Before long, there are regular customers buying her bread at the market and at the kitchen door—happy customers!

After a few weeks, Sara asks the man at the market if he would sell any other baked goods for her. He says he would like to sell her breakfast rolls in the mornings.

She knows it will take a lot of discipline to get up two hours earlier every morning if she is going to make breakfast rolls. When she thinks about her BIG HOPE, though, she knows what she has to do.

She tells the man at the market she will do it. Sara thanks Jesus.
Shelly has warned them that not all days are sunny and bright when running a business. Sara is grateful for Shelly’s wisdom, because they have all learned to plan ahead for days that might be hard. Some of the women are struggling with their business while a few others are not sure they want to continue, but Sara perseveres.

Sara discovers that, when it rains, fewer people go shopping at the market. When the kitchen ovens break down, she cannot bake her bread. All the women discover that some of their ideas for growing their businesses do not work at all. Sara is learning to be adaptable. When one thing does not work, she moves ahead and tries something else.
Sara has another idea—she could sell her bread to local schools. She prays about it. Sara figures out how much money she could earn if she sells bread to the school. She also thinks about what the extra costs would be. She sees that she could afford to hire two friends to help her bake and deliver bread. They could also help her by passing out free samples of her bread and rolls in the marketplace, encouraging people to buy it. They could help at the back door of the kitchen too, as that seems to be getting busier.

She talks to people at the school. They have heard that she is trustworthy, and she runs an honest business—one that is different from others. They agree to buy her bread if it can be delivered.

After making a change to her business plan and reviewing her financial records, she tells the school that she can deliver the bread, and she gets the job. Her diligence and perseverance are paying off.
As the months go by, Sara tries to keep her customers happy by coming up with better ways to serve them. She takes pride in trying to be the kind of person who does what she says she will do when she says she will do it.

Sara continues to bring her business records to class and is honest about reporting how much she makes each week. She is happy when she makes a profit and even happier when she sees how her savings account is growing because she puts 25% of her weekly profits into it.
What a joyful day it is for the women at their final HOPE business class. From now on when they meet, they work on a group project together. They decide that part of their project would be to do something to “give back” to others who might be in need.

When it is time to start repaying her loan, Sara remembers the many lessons Shelly taught about responsibility and planning. Sara is proud she planned well and has the money she needs for her loan payments. Sara has gained tools to make her business grow. She is growing too—growing in ways she never could have imagined.

Finally, the day comes when the women finish their project and make their last loan payments. Shelly congratulates them and tells them about the ceremony and celebration. It is a proud moment for everyone when they get their certificates saying they repaid their loans and completed the HOPE Business Program.
When Sara looks back on all that has happened since she became a part of HOPE, she can hardly believe it. She has an honorable business and happy customers. She has paid back the money she borrowed plus the loan fee. She has money saved. She takes better care of herself. She is respected and can hold her head high.

Most important of all, she now has a Savior. She has asked Jesus to be the Lord of her life.
Sara is overwhelmed with thankfulness when she thinks of how her life has changed. One of the most life-changing lessons was learning to help others.

Now that she has her own two feet on the ground, she cannot believe the pure JOY she finds in “giving back,” especially because of all she has been given.

Even though the group project is completed, Sara decides to continue giving back to others on her own. In fact, every time she bakes a batch of bread, she bakes one extra loaf to give away.
When Sara looks in the mirror, she sees a woman she hardly recognizes:

- a woman who feels empowered—and ready to face life,
- a woman who knows she has been given much—and who gives back,
- a woman who has a voice in the choices she makes,
- a woman with hope in her eyes.

Sara thanks Jesus that somebody believed in her and gave her a chance …

... the Dignity of a Chance!