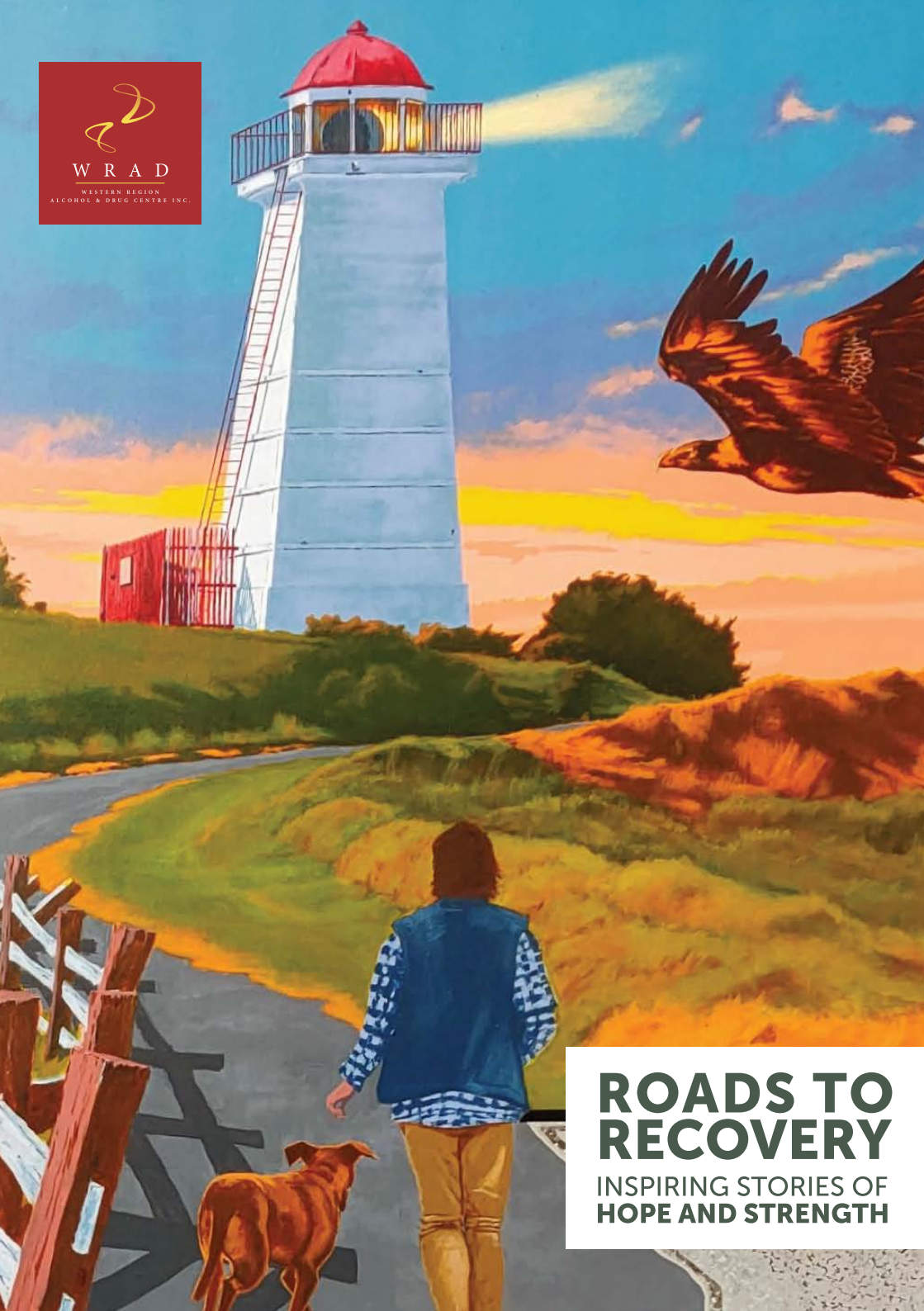




WRAD

WESTERN REGION
ALCOHOL & DRUG CENTRE INC.



ROADS TO RECOVERY

INSPIRING STORIES OF
HOPE AND STRENGTH



Unless otherwise noted, the art used in this booklet was done by participants in WRAD's Sliding Doors program.

ROADS TO RECOVERY

INSPIRING STORIES OF HOPE AND STRENGTH

Alcohol and drug addiction doesn't have to be a life sentence.

No-one is immune from addiction; people from all walks of life have had to struggle to overcome their problems, from famous musicians and actors to our neighbours and relatives.

But there is hope.

For more than 35 years, the Western Region Alcohol and Drug Centre (WRAD) has been giving people hope and offering a path to recovery.

In 2021, WRAD decided to give a voice to those who have turned their lives around through a writing project focused on recovery.

Stories of Recovery revealed brave, insightful and personal windows into the lives of people who have successfully confronted their addictions.

The stories were often traumatic, heart breaking and haunting but ultimately, they chronicled the inspiring recovery journeys of the writers. They detailed the physical, emotional, psychological and occasional legal problems that confront people with addiction issues, along with the ongoing fears of relapse amid a determination to maintain a better life.

While most of the stories were told from personal experience, some of the entries were fictional accounts from people who simply enjoy the experience of writing.

WRAD Director Geoff Soma said the short

stories focused on recovery from alcohol and other drugs and highlighted the message that treatment works.

"Sharing these stories was a way of stimulating discussion in the community and to show there is a road to recovery," Geoff said.

"These brave people who agreed to share their personal experiences helped to improve the understanding in our community about addiction issues.

"Discussing addiction helps to destigmatise the problems and to show others that it is a health issue that could afflict anyone in the community.

"We hope this competition inspires people to address their problems. Often people affected by addiction don't ask for help because they feel stigma and shame; this needs to change."

THE STORIES

The following are written by entrants in the WRAD short story competition who have consented to sharing their stories. Some have been written anonymously.

There are also three articles written by journalist Rick Bayne from interviews with clients who successfully completed WRAD's Sliding Doors program.

We thank all entrants and clients for their bravery and honesty in sharing their stories.

We hope these stories will inspire others to reach out for help.

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Mural Images:

Front Cover Image - Recovery Mural by Ricky Schembri

Page 4 Image - Black Cockatoo Mural by Jimmi Buscombe

Back Cover Image - Indigenous Mural by Fiona Clarke



FOREWORD

When I first read the stories submitted for this competition, I wished that I hadn't agreed to do it. They were all so moving. How could I possibly pick the winners? I was amazed at the courage of the writers. These brave people were exposing their hopes, their sorrows, their failures and their triumphs, making themselves vulnerable in the process.

They were also, almost without exception, paying tribute to those who had stood by them during their terrible battles with addiction.

Each story carries advice to fellow sufferers - don't give up. If you fall, try to stand and try again. In the end you can succeed. For their helpers another suggestion - don't criticise and blame, just be there and believe in the person that you knew before the addiction took its terrible hold, the person who had never really gone away.

Those who have suffered often make the best teller of tales. In the following pages you will read the work of some wonderful writers. In sharing their humanity so generously they are able to touch the sad places through which we all pass at some time in our journey.

I commend these stories to you. You will find them fascinating and brave - but best of all - they are great reads.



Paul Jennings | Paul Jennings

A MOTHER'S PERSPECTIVE

BY A MOTHER OF A CLIENT IN RECOVERY

Ding! My heart missed a beat; tears prickled my eyes, my stomach turned like a washing machine. My mouth curved into the unfamiliar feeling of a smile...now what?

What do I do now, do I react, do I pretend I didn't see it, do I tell my husband? Yes, yes scream it from the rooftops, run like the wind, jump, scream, dance, vomit for relief. I can feel the hot salty tears prickling my eyes, running down my cheeks into my mouth, along the side of my nose. I must stay calm, do not overreact, do not make an uncalculated move or everything could change in one press of a button.

I sat and looked at the screen of my phone with the biggest grin on my face, finally, five and a half months with no word, not a single word of my beautiful, intelligent second-born child and eldest daughter.

A daughter, granddaughter, sister to an older brother, sister to a younger sister, school captain, student leader in industry, and so much more, smart, oh so smart. Five and a half very long stressful months, all that time not knowing if she had a roof over her head, had she eaten, did she have clean clothing, all the things a mother thinks about when her child leaves home. And where is she, has she moved to the city, please no not the city, please I beg, I pray to God it not be the city. I quietly speak to God, not knowing what else to do, and hope that someone hears me "Please don't let her die".

For months I had been sending messages to her phone and to her messenger account and

posting heartfelt memes on our FB page in hope that something I said might spark some kind of reaction, any reaction, anything good or bad it didn't matter at this point, I just needed to know she was alive. I can't remember exactly what the meme said but for some reason it must have touched a nerve and like a strike of lightning to my head a small but significant heart emoji appeared in my comments. It's her, OMFG it's her!!

Having hit rock bottom, she asked to come home to live with any conditions I had. Her choice, the door was always open but if she left again, it was made very clear I couldn't mentally or physically do this again. Don't come if you're not serious.

After fearfully waiting for so long, the next chapter begins. Rules and boundaries had to be established.

1. Trust /support
2. Love/support
3. Respect/support
4. Patience/support
5. Support

So many things have been discussed, dark moments in the past, people have died, possessions have been sold or stolen, risky friendships formed, death threats, court hearings, stripped of all material belongings including an expensive car, criminal activity, fear, anxiety, addiction, depression all part of the journey.

Trust breeds trust, it must be given to be received. This is not the easiest of tasks considering one of you comes from a world of selfishness and desperation of what is mine is MINE! Hoarding food and soft drink became common for several

IMAGE: Tears of Hope, by Brauer College student Zoe Edwards was the winner of the 2016-17 WRAD Art in Schools competition.

weeks. Weekly urine screening by choice was a huge step taken in regaining respect from others and a massive sense of achievement with clear results every time. Every step was a step forward, no matter how embarrassing it was. Owning the addiction was in some way empowering. Honesty was paramount to recovery. Somehow being honest and up front more often than not gained respect and understanding.

In the following months, a community court order was completed along with gaining employment as a waitress and falling pregnant. She was determined not to fail, continued working throughout the entire pregnancy and eventually returned to work three months after giving birth.

It all seems so long ago now, so many wonderful proud moments since that little heart emoji popped up, it's hard to believe this was ever part of our lives.

Some consider me to be a hard mother but all that really know me know that my children are my life. I will do whatever it takes to keep them safe; I have never been unfair. What I did not realise is that it would ever be this hard. This almost cost me my life, I would happily have given it for hers but for us both to be lost was just so unfair to everyone that loves us. I remember my daughter-in-law bursting into tears telling me to stop. I need to stop as she could see me slipping away. Up until that point I didn't realise how detached I had become from life; it was just a process on repeat.

Methamphetamine does not discriminate. It will take everything you love, your belongings, your family, yourself respect and it will laugh at you every time it wins.

The big secret is that YOU have the POWER! YOU can do this.

Love, support, respect, trust.

Today my beautiful girl has full time employment in disability; she had to jump through many hoops to be able to follow this dream and doesn't take it lightly. She is completing a disability course and enjoys this dream job of helping others. I think it's her way of correcting the wrongs in her life and she is perfectly suited to the position. Along with this, she is Mum to an almost four-year-old and recently purchased her first home with our help.

We are so very proud of her journey and who she has become. Complete and total Love, Trust, and Respect.

“

LOVE, SUPPORT,
RESPECT, TRUST”



ALCOHOL, MY WORST ENEMY

BY VIRGINIE LEFEBVRE

It all started 25 years ago, as I was opening my first bottle of alcohol at the age of 12.

By 14, I was working behind the bar serving beers to drunk French soccer fanatics, smoking marijuana quickly followed by LSD, ecstasy and all sorts of drugs.

I somehow managed to keep track on life, graduated Year 12 and left home.

I travelled the world, starting my career in hospitality, working in lots of different places in Europe and becoming fully qualified in all aspects of my industry.

Life was like a dream, earning lots of money, working big events, being a workaholic while snorting cocaine.

But how many times did I get myself in trouble by being so drunk, having no idea what happened the night before? Where were my belongings or what was the name of the guy I woke up with?

In 2005, I came to Australia. The party kept on going, living in Bondi, constantly getting lit.

After travelling the country, I settled down in the South West Coast where I met the man that I thought was the love of my life.

We travelled, got married, had children, bought a house.

Things kind of settled for a while but then came a divorce and the addictions came back, twice as much as ever!

Luckily, I had a good situation so I could afford to buy a house for my children and I.

But the evil bottle was drowning me slowly; one glass of wine after a hard day at work, then two, then a bottle a night then two...

Binge drinking was a habit every time my children weren't around.

Everything was a burden but I was still thinking at that time that I was a "responsible alcoholic" as I was managing my life.

It took me years to realise how much alcohol had affected my life and that it was my addictions creating most of my problems, putting myself in danger more and more each time, slowly losing my dignity black out after black out.

The depression became deep, consuming more and more day after day.

I hit the bottom, lost a few friends, smashed my car, lost my licence. At that point I couldn't do it anymore, it had to stop...finally, here it was: the WAKE-UP call!

I reached for help at WRAD, got some counselling, got medicated, supported and realised that yes, I was an alcoholic!

I stayed sober for two years and became a different person; a person I never thought I would be, waking up at 6.30 every morning.

I became a sport addict, got the fittest I've ever been in my life, worked hard, saved a lot of money by not consuming or chain smoking.

People thought I was an inspiration and that my strength was unreal. I was proud, aware, motivated and healthy...until 2020 hit, the year my life felt apart as the world pandemic started!



Our holidays got cancelled, I had to stay home as a "non-essential" worker and home-school my children, dealing with disappointment after disappointment.

NO more sport, NO more social life, NO more trips home, slowly realising that we won't be seeing our family for a long time due to this travel ban.

COVID had a huge impact in our life and my old demons came back, consuming all sorts of drugs to cope with this ongoing terrible situation.

I reached the bottom again, lost my licence again, broke a few ribs and disappointed my children as they had grown by then and were able to witness that their mum wasn't right and was drinking heavily...but what a feeling it was to get lit again!

I thought I was in control and wouldn't take the same path again but of course I wasn't. The evil came back, followed by the lies, the shame, the guilt...not able to keep any promises.

I couldn't resist until the night my daughter had to call an ambulance; they packed my bag and got me ready to be admitted to the detox department!

Rehab, a place I never in my life expected to end up. As a strong, resilient, successful woman, it was the last place I thought I'd end up but here I was. On 20 March 2021, I entered rehab, leaving all my responsibilities behind along with the bottles, the marijuana, the cigarettes, the internet, the phone and all the rest.

I cried myself dry as I entered the ward. How was I going to be able to do this???

But here was the HELP, the SUPPORT, the COMPASSION, the UNDERSTANDING of my situation and how I ended up here.

The nurses at the South West Healthcare were unbelievable!

They listened to me for hours, got me the right medication and helped me smoothly redraw.

I got in touch with WRAD again and WellWays for some extra support.

I understood how much help was available in the community and that I wasn't alone.

I started eating again, took care of myself, made a plan to recovery, worked on fixing all my problems focussing on the priorities and learned how to relax.

The time actually went fast to my surprise.

I stayed in rehab for 11 days.

Today, April 29, I'm proud to stay that I am 41-days sober.

I feel amazing, alive and aware.

My skin is shining. My bruises have disappeared and my children look at me with love and pride.

I know the road to recovery is far from finished but my strength and motivation are bigger than ever, and with the help and support from my doctor, WRAD, AA meetings and WellWays, I know I am not alone and on the right path to keep living my amazing life.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has been involved in my road to recovery.



I CAN'T BELIEVE IT

BY GEORGE HANSFORD

Alarm bells ringing loudly, nurses and doctors rushed to his ward, and soon the crash cart arrived, the doctors working feverishly on bringing him back to life. I watched this battle and the remarkable dedication of the medical team as they recovered this young man from his second drug overdose in as many months.

How was it possible for this eighteen-year-old young man to be so heavily addicted to drugs? It didn't matter what he took, he was going to try everything just to deal with the pain he was going through. It must have been his parents' fault that he was like this, where were they, didn't they care, did they boot him out of home, what was his sin that was too big for his parents to accept, too many questions, no answers, who did he belong too?

Why did he just disappear from home one day, why was he drawn to this drug dependent community? They were now his family. Dean embraced the daily binge drinking, drugs were laid on, and the girls loved him, why would Dean want to leave this happy and disparate group? Dean was a clever guy and quickly learned how to propagate a crop of marijuana in sheds under lights, he was a champion student and was able to dry and prepare the weed for sale, he became a valuable asset to his new Community.

Dean could remember names, and he made friends very easily. His reputation was growing quickly; people liked him because he was very resourceful, if you wanted anything, call Dean; he'll get it for you. He did stuff for plenty of people, and knew when to call in a favour, he was good, and he quickly became a respected driver too. Dean learned how to drive on the family acreage as a kid, slipping and sliding his car like a pro. Dean gained great ability and confidence behind the wheel of the car. Did you want something delivered, give it to Dean, and you know it's done! Want to get somewhere quickly, call Dean he'll get you there alright. Your car broken down? Call Dean, he'll fix it for nothing. Dean was the "fixit guy", nothing was too hard for him, after all, they were all his mates, weren't they?

I forgot to mention that Dean would contact his parents when he needed help, needed a break, needed to recover. He would arrive home gaunt, ghostlike, spent, asking for food or money, and specking out the house for what he could steal to sell for more drugs. This happened so often over the many wasted years.

Dean would say that his Drug Community was his family now, but he kept coming home to his "safe zone". The food was good, and it was regular, and once sated, and, with fresh clean clothes again, he would disappear into the night. Dean had become a "night person", he slept through the day and met his mates in the night. He was a "couch surfer", putting his head down wherever he found himself; his life was not only back-to-front, but fully upside-down and inside out and simply wrong, but it was his life.

How many times did we, his parents, receive a call in the early morning hours asking whether we knew a young man called Dean and whether he was our son? Too many times he was found beaten, overdosed or so emaciated that the skin on his body hung loosely over his bones. This bag of bones was our son, and we couldn't save him; but

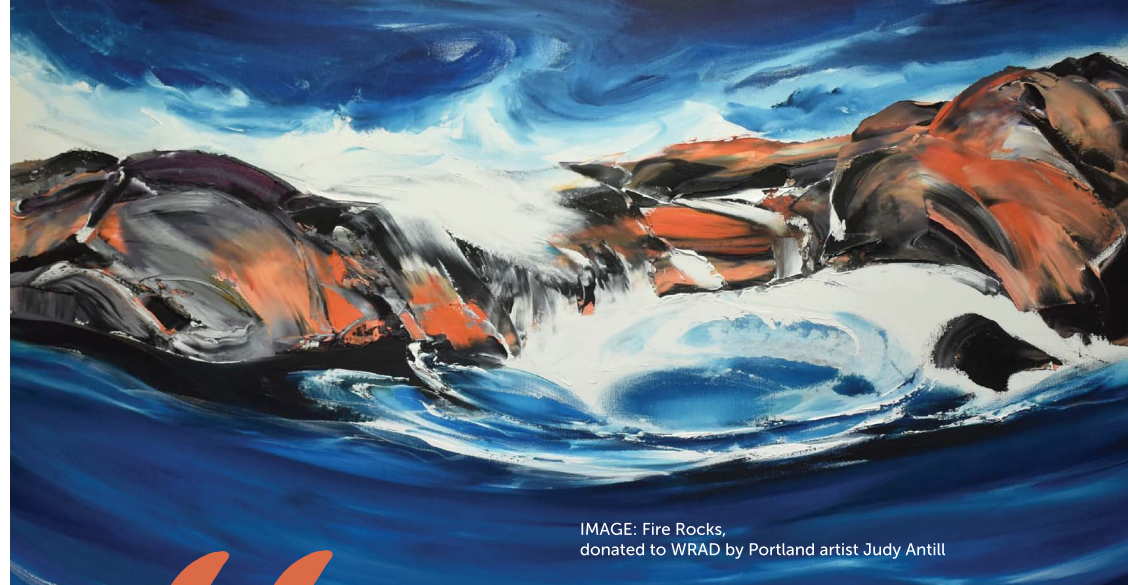


IMAGE: Fire Rocks, donated to WRAD by Portland artist Judy Antill



TO ME, HE IS A REAL CHAMPION, A GIANT OF A MAN"

we again visited him in hospital, waiting until he was released to bring him home. Thirteen wasted years in the drug-soaked wilderness, what could we do as parents? We loved our only son, and were desperate to see him overcome and recover from this painful and debilitating disease.

Dean was raised in a Christian home, where he had learned good family values. We had placed our hope in Dean's ability to respond to those values and work his way back from the dark abyss of his dependance on drugs, and his reliance on his wild and irresponsible Community of addicts, his peer group; those who accepted him just as he was, because he was useful to them.

How could anyone imagine how desperate life would become for Dean's family, when his Dad had a terrible industrial accident that would change the family's life forever. Two years later, Dad is still in terrible shape, his recovery was slow, his mind fully challenged, his mobility limited in a way that tethered him to slow movement. His recovery was terribly slow, Dad needed lots of help. And, the cavalry finally came.

It was years after the accident before Dean's next visit brought with it a promise to stay with Dad and help him get better. Dean was a new man, his commitment to help Dad never waived. Dean sat with his Dad; was quick to anticipate Dad's needs, and was quick to stop his Dad slipping away to the tree that he'd identified to end his own life, such was Dad's trauma. Who in their right mind would spend hours each day sitting just watching chooks as they pecked, scratched and ate their way through the day, and yet, all this was therapeutic for Dean's Dad?

The most amazing truth cannot be ignored, Dean left his drug dependent Community, everything he'd known for thirteen years, and, in staying to help his Dad, and with medical help, Dean went "cold turkey", and had finally but powerfully won his battle against drug dependance.

Dean is now truly his own man, no longer the victim, but an active and vibrant man helping so many. Dean has a strong community consciousness, and is quick to offer many the help they need as he continues to forge a life as a man committed to his own growth and self-development.

I'm a proud Dad, a father to a remarkable man. Dean has been clean for seventeen years. To me, he is a real champion, a giant of a man.

ME, MATE? NO WORRIES!

BY JIM EWING

Morning sunlight spearing through curtains' gap seared. Otherwise, everything felt rosy ... well, okay, rosé. Grasping desperately needed water bottle, with a croak I gasped, 'Whew, that was good!'

'Making love to a brewery?'

'Didn't...' H2O swallowed, 'hear you complaining.'

'No point, seeing you'd already started before I woke up.'

Yet spoken without rancour, laughed in fact: sugar had nothing on Vivienne's sweetness. Met 2007, a year later moved in together. Well-suited, physical compatibility the cake's icing. A Seventies' hippy who stayed true to her values, Vivienne still favoured cheesecloth. Damp strands of the once blonde long hair now blended with grey were brushed clear of eyes.

'Any idea what time you got home last night?'

'Midnight?'

'Two-thirty.'

'Well, it was a footy reunion?'

'And you drove home, pissed... again.'

Smallest smile, a sigh, shake of head. 'Darl, what if you'd hit ... y'know, some little kid riding a bike?'

'Come on Viv, at two-thirty a.m.?''

Edge to my voice, she did not pursue the issue.

Oh yeah, dinkum denial - of booze or any other problems: I was not going to listen to Vivienne. Different situation, however, with my GP Bernie:

we went wa-a-ay back, premiership teammates, he at that same reunion where I got hammered, except all night Bernie sipped lights.

Annual check-up, sphygmomanometer put aside... 'Fraction high, old mate, but otherwise, yep, body's still in fair shape.'

'Good stuff, Bern.'

'How're the sleep patterns?'

'Same. Three solid hours, wide awake a few more, then this kinda desultory kip until dawn.'

'And on your alcohol-free nights?'

'Mate, what're they?'

We both chuckle, before Bernie says, 'Couple of bad concussions during your career, right?' 'K.o'd four times, three shirt-fronts and a king-hit. But so what?'

'Aw, doing some research on brain trauma.'

A shrug. 'Ever feel suicidal?'

'Nah. Have the odd grey day, but what middle-aged bloke doesn't?'

'Bursts of anger?'

'Occasional. Blew up at Viv yesterday for bugging up my soft-boiled eggs. Storm in a brekkie teacup though, passed fast, nothing nasty.'

'Ever consider,' says Bernie, 'you might have depression?'

'Me, depressed? You're joking!'

'Cobber, the self-medication is un-ignorable. I'll be blunt: my take is there's a real issue with grog here, maybe other things too.' And before I can say bullshit, Bernie bulldozes on, 'So what I want to do is arrange that you see someone.'

'A fucking shrink,' I assume accurately, 'no way!'

Bernie knows me very well - that the nerve hit here is less one of self-esteem, far more in my hip-pocket. 'It's all right,' he grins, 'he bulk bills.'

I tell Vivienne nothing about the psychiatrist. Working from his own suburban home, he is bearded, portly, pedantic, and pompous. My dislike is almost instant. I suspect this is mutual. He asks some curly questions, seems bored by my answers, scans Bernie's notes, adds others, closes folder. 'Depression, no question,' he says, 'but fortunately not severe. I can fix it.' Wall full of diplomas and doctorates, I must accept the bloke's savviness. Yet, anticipating a talking cure, I find he has something else in mind for my mind. A prescription is pushed across his desk.

'Any alcohol allowed when taking this stuff?' I ask, praying he will say... 'In moderation.'

Bewdy!

Compliant lamb me toddles off to pharmacy, gets prescription filled, pops into nearest pub, drops first red bomb, washes it down with several pots of Carlton. Now, should I inform Vivienne of developments? No, wait to see how it goes.

Two weeks later.

'Don't worry darl, it happens to all blokes.'

'Well, you'd know,' I say mildly, which surprises. I meant to snap at her. Nevertheless, the barb penetrates.

'There was no need for that.'

'It's just never happened to me before, okay?'

Her expression after my semi-apology is that of the faithful dog kicked. I spill the beans about those anti-depressants.

'I wondered what was wrong,' she responds, 'even before...'

'Meaning what?'

'You've been sort of ... zombieified. Give me the old volatile you anytime.'

I return to the scone doctor's, my intention being to inform him of the medication's detrimental effects high and low, and say I want off the stuff. He is delayed. Shown into his consulting room

and left alone, I am able to examine this bloke's professional space. One detail only is remarkable. Beneath unoccupied desk there is a straight line worn in the carpet: whilst assessing others, the fella incessantly runs one shoe back and forth. Happily, I decide, 'This bastard's madder than I'll ever be!'

I am less happy once the shrink fronts. We argue. Finally he yells, 'But admit it, I have helped you, I have helped you!' which I reckon confirms my diagnosis of him. Maybe however, he has been of assistance. Once off the zombie drug, I begin to appreciate when blue moods are pending, and develop diversionary strategies. And hey, when these fail, there's always my fallback grog remedy ... If not overdone, all remains fine in the cot too. Yet, though I do pace myself, sometimes a Scotch does provide irresistible enhancement.

Opened bleary eyes perceive a standing Vivienne. State of our bedroom suggests a suicide bombing. She holds an empty Grants bottle. Last night...? Jigsaw puzzle, most pieces missing. Vivienne walks out of the room, says not a word, doesn't have to. Her deep, deep hurt said it, 'The booze or me. Choose!' Which I did, meaning that nowadays I am a decade sober, but also five years without Viv.

The Hep C finally caught up with her: yeah, she knew plenty about addiction. Christ, I miss her! To have a loving person is a huge advantage if battling abuse of any substance. Yet, she is gone. Dodgy days now, although I have friends with whom I can communicate, the one I most talk to is me.

The principal difference between the person I was, and the bloke I am now, is that this bloke has learned to listen to himself.

“
THIS BLOKE HAS
LEARNED TO LISTEN
TO HIMSELF”

THE UNDERAGE DRINKING CAPITAL

BY STUART MCDONALD

My story begins around 30 years ago. I'm originally from Northern Ireland and started drinking at the age of 15 when one of my crew of underage teenage friends summoned up the courage to brave the bottle shop attendant.

I can still remember the taste of that cheap German lager and the thrill and excitement as it changed my consciousness. My hometown was featured in a TV current affairs show where it was dubbed 'the underage drinking capital of Europe.' Northern Ireland was in the tail end of a low-level civil war we called 'The Troubles' and the police had their hands full dealing with paramilitary violence, allowing us to drink unmolested in parks and golf courses before rolling home to our parents. We imbibed cheap cider or vodka mixed with orange juice. Our aim was to get drunk, as quickly as possible.

When I turned 18, I graduated to the local pubs and nightclubs. We still bought booze from the bottle shop and drank at home before we went. We told ourselves this was to save money on pub prices, but for me it was all about getting smashed. I would drink far more than my friends, an early sign that I had a problem. Often, I'd turn up at the pub so inebriated that I'd already blacked out. I'd spend a good part of my weekly wage over the bar, often getting kicked out by bouncers and somehow stumbling my way

home on autopilot. I'd wake up the next day vomiting into a bucket beside my bed, unable to get out, with a jackhammer pounding inside my head. Sometimes I'd wake up in someone else's bed with no idea how I'd got there. Once I was stumbling alongside an embankment above a highway when I tumbled off, rolling through the shrubbery and weeds before coming to an ungainly halt, mercifully before I hit the tarmac. I must have passed out before coming to hours later, my leather jacket covered in dirt and vomit.

This behaviour continued through my twenties and thirties. I was never a daily drinker; my alcohol consumption was crammed into a day or two over the weekend. I never thought I had a problem, because everyone around me was doing the same. Ireland has always had a difficult relationship with alcohol. There are more heavy drinkers, but also more abstainers than just about anywhere in Europe. I might have drunk more than most, but not so much that anyone cared or noticed, apart from my poor worried mother.

In 1999, I managed to save up \$10,000 and took a year-long career break from my dead-end civil service job. I followed the Down Under backpacker route, moved to Melbourne and fell in with a bunch of Irish expats. Rather than do the usual tour of the Top End and the Great Barrier Reef, I managed to spend my money behind the bar.

Soon I met a local girl, and after she fell pregnant, we decided to make a go of it. My circle of friends moved from my Irish bar buddies to my wife's friends and family who were heavily into amphetamines. Soon I was combining speed and alcohol, staying up on all night benders. I was now working as a primary school teacher, and starting to miss Mondays at work to get over my binges.

Falling into a substance induced depression, my marriage ended and I returned to Ireland. The speed was gone, but I resumed binge drinking with a passion. After a few years in the wilderness, I returned to Melbourne to reconnect with my daughter. Almost immediately I met the woman who is now my wife. She likes a drink too and we would binge together, but after a while she realised my consumption was out of control. It was her or the drink; I couldn't have both.

For the first time in my life, I had to admit I had a problem. I'd been drinking on autopilot up until then. I went to a GP who specialised in drug and alcohol counselling. He referred me to a non-residential six-week rehab program called Catalyst. On the first day I nearly walked out of the program. There were 15 other participants but to my mind they were 'real alcoholics,' not a weekend drinker like me. Some of them were still going through withdrawal or lived in boarding houses. Why was I thrown in with these losers? I stuck out the first day, and the second and the days turned into weeks. When I got to know my fellow participants, I realised that they weren't losers, they were just troubled souls. I was too. We received individual counselling, as well as

group sessions covering cognitive behaviour therapy, art therapy, mindfulness and more.

The most helpful sessions for me covered finding out my triggers and motivation for drinking. No-one starts out with a bottle in their hand; why did I choose to pick up a can aged 15? The answer lay in my family story and cultural background.

Armed with the tools I had picked up during rehab, I ventured out into a world saturated with alcohol, but determined to remain sober. Saturday night was the most difficult time. After 30 years drinking automatically at the weekend, I wanted to sprint to the nearest pub and fill up. I used a mindfulness technique called 'urge surfing,' noticing the desire to drink and letting it pass rather than fighting it. As weeks turned into months the urge dissipated, until I went a whole year sober.

It hasn't all been plain sailing since then. I've suffered short lapses and longer relapses, but today I'm clean and sober. I'm enjoying just being here in the world, with no desire to alter my consciousness. I do get twinges of desire, but the longer you practice sobriety, the easier it becomes.





RECOVERY FROM THE UNKNOWN

ANONYMOUS

I love my footy and the Western Bulldogs. I've had a lot of success playing football. In 2019, I snapped my ACL, PCL and meniscus. There was a six-month wait before surgery then a long recovery. Without footy I felt lost. The year before I lost really important people in my life; my best mate died in a car accident and my 'Pop' died of melanoma. Those losses changed everything and my life hasn't been the same since.

Later in 2019 I found myself living with a mate who was a dealer. I was offered free meth for a few months.

I would use once a week, usually on Fridays after I finished work. My mate told me he would never let me get hooked and would never let me have my own pipe. I thought he was a decent mate. He ended up buying me my own pipe and the meth was free until I couldn't do without it. I had to start paying for drugs and began using daily.

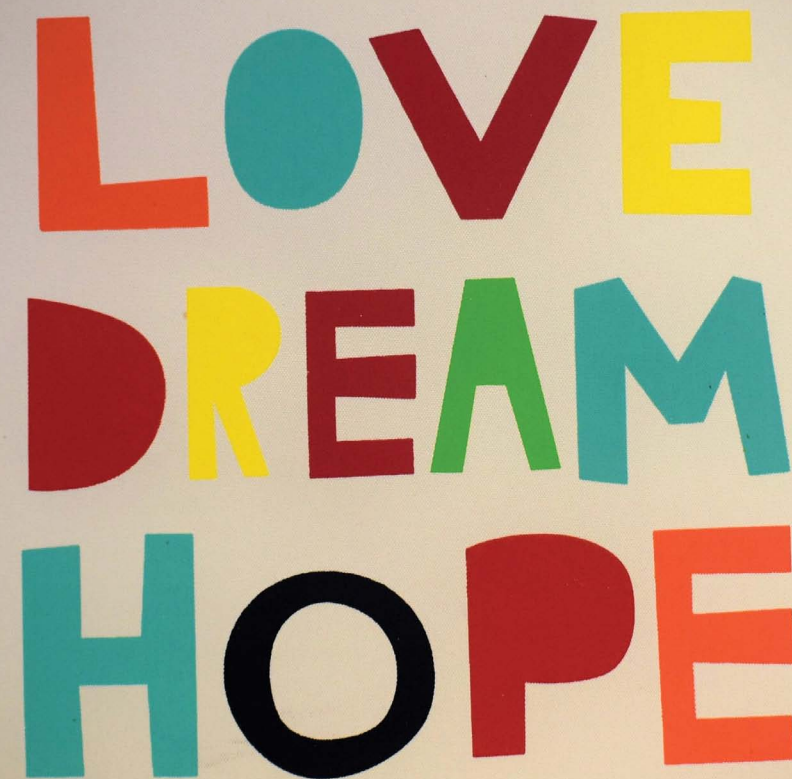
And when shit went down with the cops, my mates started ditching me and disappearing.

I reached out for help when I started realising just how much trouble I was in. By that time, I had been a daily user for over a year, facing criminal charges, was in toxic relationships and one night I was bashed by three men in balaclavas. I still have no idea why those men bashed me and I have nightmares about that night to this day. I was always on edge and worried about being caught. Never being able to relax was exhausting and the come downs were getting worse. I felt desperate. I remember driving to my dealer's house and waiting two hours for them to come home so I could score.

It boiled down to an easy choice in the end - I have a beautiful relationship with my partner's child. Although not biologically my own, I love her as if she was. She was and is the biggest motivator to sort my life out. With support and a positive mindset, I am now over six months drug-free.

When I engaged in treatment, I was not sure what I was expecting, but I knew I needed the help. I really liked the people I met, they have been wonderful help. I have met with three AOD workers at WRAD and all have made me feel comfortable. I usually bottle things up and am a shy person. I can't talk to my parents about these things because they don't understand. I have actually enjoyed talking about everything and getting it out has been really beneficial. I think I am now a little bit more open about things with people, but it's still hard.

I learnt about the brain. I learnt how drugs affect the brain and the different stages of recovery.



LOVE
DREAM
HOPE

I found this helpful because it explained what I was feeling and gave me a better understanding. I got through the 'adjustment' stage and am now in the 'resolution' stage. I have learnt a lot about myself and the importance of setting goals and having positive things to focus on, especially after feeling so lost. I have been able to get a good job, my ute is now roadworthy and almost back on the road, I am paying off debt and have a savings account and am back playing footy. My AOD worker suggested I use an app called 'I am sober'. This app shows how many days I have been drug free and calculates a total of how much money I have saved by not using, based on what I was previously spending on drugs. I still look at this app today and it reaffirms everything I am doing and gives me a boost.

The relationship changes I have had to make were challenging. I learnt that even though you may love someone, the relationship may not

be healthy and for you to be healthy you need to say goodbye. I had to say goodbye to some unhealthy relationships and friendships. However, I have grown from this experience and my partner and I have grown together, strengthening our bond. More recently, I have improved relationships with my parents and am rebuilding trust again.

My advice to others would be to accept the help that's there. There are supports that are wanting to help you. I didn't accept the help that was there and ended up nearly going to jail. I am lucky that I have steered away from this after reaching out for support and have turned my life around. I still think about how things could have been different and kick myself over some of the decisions I have made. It hurts to think about it but I am proud of the how I've come out the other side. It is so nice to be relaxed and not be worried about what's around the corner.

RECOVERY

BY SHAE HUSSON. DRUG FREE SINCE LATE 2016

It took me less than four months to lose everything because of my addiction to methamphetamine and weed.

In 2015 I had finished Year 12 and moved to Warrnambool for work and potentially study. I came from a family that had much love and support and was raised with good manners and morals. I was working three jobs, sometimes 80-hour weeks, until one day, I asked a friend to roll me a few joints as I was having trouble sleeping. Harmless right? I know people scoff about weed being a 'gateway' drug, but for me, it was. My drug confidence grew and the next thing I knew I was doing pills and lines of whatever on nights out. It didn't take long to make 'friends' with other drug users where I then had my first try of ice and just like that, I was addicted.

During this time, I cut all contact with my family. I was so ashamed of the person I was becoming and I knew that it would hurt my family so much if they knew what I was doing. I remember my mum coming over from Portland one day, and I sat in the car telling her that I hated her because she was trying to take me to see a doctor. I was even more resistant to getting help after that day.

I loved being on drugs at the time. It was so easy. No bills to pay, no care in the world, nothing to lose, until it got serious, really serious. I became homeless, doing anything for money or some ice, or just to fill in time. I remember being so angry every time the sun rose, as another day passed where hadn't slept. I once went 20 days with no real sleep.

I met so many people who had been or have now been in jail or suffering serious mental health

issues. Late 2016 I was desperate for something to change. It was too hard to ask for help, I almost didn't want my family to help me because I didn't want to feel like I was losing the small amount of control I had left. I didn't want my family to see me at half my body weight, scabby and paranoid. So, I broke into a family member's home and stole something I thought I could get a good amount of money for so that I could continue running away from my problems.

Later I found out that the police wanted to talk to me, so I drove, and drove. I don't even remember those few days, but I do remember sending my mum a love heart emoji because I thought I was going to kill myself. I can't even begin to explain the pain that I felt. I knew I had fucked up my life. I knew there's no going back, that I would always have a record, always have this heavy fog following me, this sack of sorry's to carry with me if I continued living. Somehow, for some reason, I found my way back to Warrnambool. I got some more drugs and, for the moment, those feelings slipped away again.

I came to the conclusion that there was no point running from the police. I had nothing left to lose anyway, and at least I would be fed and have a place to stay for a while. This was the best decision I ever made. The detective that interviewed me didn't give me a free ride, he didn't say that it would all be okay; he was real and he gave me a chance. He treated me like a human when I didn't feel like I deserved it. Since then, I've been able to hold my head high and thank the detective for saving my life. I can only hope that I can change someone's life like he has changed mine.

Following my interview, I had to move home with my mum, dad and younger sister. My sister who was 10 was scared of me. She was genuinely fearful of me and I hated that. I was



scared of me too, waiting for the explosion of rage or the urge to steal from my family again so that I could escape for a while. I fell pregnant while I was two weeks clean and realised that I had a responsibility to this child and could never consider drugs again. I attended drug counselling, weekly urine screening, got a job, completed my community corrections order and became a single mother at 20 years old. I'm now 24 and have just recently moved out of my parent's house, I've also just got an amazing job and my life could not be better.

I'm not going to lie and say that recovery is easy. It isn't. If you have a loved one who has a drug or

alcohol problem, there's no use telling them how wrong, useless or worthless they are, because they probably already feel like that. Remind them how beautiful they are, remind them of the good times and their accomplishments before drugs. If you have a mate that is going down a bad path, be there for them, try to give them other options than going to get or use drugs, go camping, be kind. If you are struggling with addiction, take it day by day. My advice is to try to separate yourself from a social group that use drugs to start and go from there. It's hard to ask for help, sometimes it's hard to give help too, but it's the most worthwhile thing you will do.



**IF YOU ARE
STRUGGLING WITH
ADDICTION, TAKE IT
DAY BY DAY"**

THE WARDEN'S VOICE

BY JONATHAN THOMAS

The traffic was slowing up and merging into one lane. My heart sank. Further around the bend, I could see blue and red lights reflecting off the houses. I knew it! A random breath test! I held the steering wheel with my knees. In desperation, I reached for a water bottle and some spearmint gum in a frenzied attempt to mask any alcohol on my breath. It was Sunday 10:15am. I was with my family, on the way to church.

The constable said gruffly, "You will need to blow into it again, sir, but this time, one continual strong puff, till the beeper sounds."

Added the constable, "You are right to go ... but only just." I was 0.02.

The sip of tawny port at the early morning communion service set me off again. 'Have a scotch on ice and you'll feel better,' whispered a voice that I always obeyed. Sixty minutes later, we set off for the main church service.

It was like I was trapped in a cage. The moment I obeyed 'that voice' a key opened the padlock and I started to climb out. The voice of a callous warden, unlocking a cold, steely padlock, 'Come

on! Out you get!' Now, I was free. Intentionally, he failed to inform me that I was still attached to the cage. He had given me a single day's worth of chain, clasped around my neck.

When I woke the next morning, I was back in the cage and, nowhere in sight, was the warden or the key for that wretched padlock.

'It is impossible to escape this prison,' this same voice terrorised. 'We will talk about it tomorrow. Do not care for today, you will get through.'

"What about my precious wife and two beautiful children?" I would reply. But it was as if my imploration had been spoken to an empty court room. No judge, no jury. Outside patiently in the beating rain, all my loved ones were awaiting the final hearing. Beyond them, I could hear the shouting: "Don't you think you should just cut back your drinking?" and "Surely there are other ways to cope with stress?"

These heartless citations enraged me. Then the warden held up his slate tablet. 'Read it again!' he demanded, as I refocused on the defaced etchings:

'What the hell would they know? They haven't sustained the trauma you've had in your life!'

'They haven't copped the verbal abuse and an employee's attempt to kill you with a lump of steel!'

'They haven't had a child with a neurological disability who was never accepted in his own community.'

'You don't want to be one of those who can't handle alcohol. No one will want to come to your house.'

'You will never fit in with your extended family and community, whose very existence couldn't even imagine living without alcohol.'

I CAN'T GO A DAY WITHOUT ALCOHOL. CAN YOU HELP ME?" I ASKED MY DOCTOR. IT WAS EASIER THAN I THOUGHT TO GET THAT QUESTION OUT.

'It's okay to tell lies about your alcohol. Here is a Lie Licence and I will not give it an expiration date.'

My family watched as I exited the side door of the courthouse. I cast my eyes across the footpath, towards them. My mind captured this image which often woke me at night. No verdict, no conclusion, no words spoken. Just a foggy, out-of-focus film clip of me stumbling in slow motion, back to my cage. Stony silence, my head hanging down by the weight of the chain.

Another day concluded; another whole bottle of scotch consumed. 'Rest now, we will talk about it tomorrow. Your family will still love you tomorrow,' promised the warden.

I awoke to a partially cloudy day with indications of a possible storm, as heavy clouds encompassed all horizons.

'A couple of paracetamols and a scotch at lunchtime will clear the storm,' the voice said. I remembered I had a doctor's appointment that morning. As I rushed through the kitchen, my daughter gave me a beautiful smile and my wife confirmed her love for me. My son opened the front door and waved both arms at me, as I drove away. The warmth and love of my family encompassed me.

I needed to change!

"I can't go a day without alcohol. Can you help me?" I asked my doctor. It was easier than I thought to get that question out.

"Help certainly is available and I will support you. How much are you drinking?" he replied calmly. At this point, I did not know doctor would triple the amount I had stated, to structure a more accurate picture.

Two days into a fifteen-day medical treatment, a relieving warden, one I had never seen before, encircled my cage. The action of asking my doctor for help forced my allocated warden to report as sick. He entered my cage and pinned me to the cold, concrete floor. He demanded, 'This isn't working. Go pour yourself a drink,' and I did just that.

I regained consciousness in hospital, unable to walk or talk. My body was shutting down. My life was concluding. My wife and children left the ward late that night.

Death confronted me. The cage lock had rusted over. No wardens were in sight.

Morning dawned. I was handed a different slate tablet titled: Extremum Fato ["One Last Chance"].

I read the beautiful etchings:

'There is help, there is hope, don't give up.'

'Never be ashamed.'

'You are not alone.'

'We are always here to support and love you.'

'If you fall off the bike, get straight back on and keep going.'

'Yes, you will need to change some friends who only connect with alcohol.'

'Let your trusted friends know your commitment to assist with accountability.'

There are no wardens, no voice, no cage, no chain. I am not in prison.

For me, a recovered alcoholic for seven years now, there is no safe amount. Not even one. One sip will arouse the warden and he has promised me he will escort me to the gallows for a public execution.

WHO AM I

BY EBONY BENNETT

*I am a mother, a daughter,
a granddaughter, a sister,
a lover, a friend and I am
an addict...*

My addiction started as a teenager binge drinking and smoking bongs with friends. In my late teens I popped pills and did lines of speed, without knowing this would be the beginning of a 10-year meth addiction that would see me lose everything, including my children and most importantly myself. Like many addicts, I am a survivor of childhood trauma, violence, sexual assault and mental health issues.

I grew up in home fuelled by family violence. I was bullied severely at school but it didn't stop there; my teen years were also hard. I was self-harming from 13, raped at 14 then blamed and called a slut when it was revealed, had my first child at 17 and by 19 I was in my own physically violent relationship that lasted three years and another baby didn't fix it (stupid idea, I know).

With all of that comes abandonment issues, PTSD, depression, anxiety and BPD to name a few. Not seeking help in my younger years sadly resulted in me self-medicating from around 20 until I was 30. Ten years doesn't sound so long on paper but the trauma and disheartening experiences I went through in that time will probably be more than the average person goes through in their entire life. Sadly, most addicts know what I'm talking about.

The last five years though have been the hardest years of my life, you see four years ago I lost the custody of my second child. By this time, I had three children; three different dads. When you lose custody of a child something inside you

changes, dies. You are grieving a child that is still alive and I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy. My other two children suffered greatly, I could no longer parent them, I felt they deserved better and I didn't deserve them. Every time I looked at them, I saw their sister and it killed me. It was then my addiction would spiral into something else. I was no longer chasing the high, I was longing for oblivion!

2020 - what lockdown? No way was I getting locked down, but it gave me a great excuse to leave my kids at home with my nan because hey I didn't want them catching corona and I couldn't come home because I had been all over the place and what if I have it or am carrying it? The year saw me on meth, GHB, prescriptions and Ketamine normally at the same time. I was a zombie and I loved it. Finally, I couldn't feel anything, the feelings that controlled my every move were gone; I was empty, numb...I'd found the oblivion I was searching for and so close to death but not quite there. I didn't want my children seeing me like this so I was never home. When I did go home, I was only there to put them to bed and then I was back out dealing drugs and doing what I could to get them.

My eldest daughter decided she would be better off with her dad in Queensland. I'd lost another child. Reliving the trauma of losing the first child, I couldn't bear to lose my son too. I decided this was it. I was done. I didn't want this for my kids and I didn't want this for myself.

I went into detox at Nova House Bendigo and from there went to Bendigo Bridge Program. I cannot put into words what this place has done for me, it changed my life. The program, the workers, the peer support workers everything... if it wasn't for this place, I'd most likely be back on it and dead. It was here that I found myself again, forgave myself, held myself accountable



**WHO AM I? I AM A FIGHTER,
A SURVIVOR AND AN ADDICT
THAT FOUND HER WAY TO
RECOVERY AND HAPPINESS”.**

and the start of the rest of my life began. It wasn't an easy road; there were plenty of tears and “I can't do this”, but I got there in the end with the undying support of my worker and the other staff.

Six months later I'm six months clean and loving every minute of it. Finally, I have hope, I feel what it feels like to be happy, to truly love and be loved. I love myself, flaws and all, something that still shocks me because I never believed that I'd be able to that after 30 years of hating myself.

I have some hard days and days where I miss the escape that drugs gave me, but I wouldn't give up my recovery for anything. It's harder being in active addiction than recovery will ever be. Recovery gives back life, it gives choices, empowerment and love. Integrating back into the community I left behind was hard and so I left. I moved four hours away, changed my number and deleted social media. I cut off everyone who wasn't family and headed off to start a new life with my son. My eldest daughter is coming to visit in the holidays and is finally able

to say she is proud of me. I'm working part time in a job that I love and I'm enrolling into an AOD course at the end of the year because I want nothing more than to give back. It's my hope that by sharing my story other addicts will hear my success and they will see that recovery is possible and that maybe I didn't go through everything I did for nothing. If you want recovery enough, making sacrifices like relocating and cutting off people could be the difference in making it work. Yeah, it gets lonely, and I'm not going to say I don't miss the social side doing drugs has, but honestly, I'd rather this kind of lonely that the lonely you feel in a room filled with people. A word of advice; don't give up on yourself. Forget counting how many times you fall, that number is irrelevant- it's how many times you get back up and try again that matters!

Who am I? I am a fighter, a survivor and an addict that found her way to recovery and happiness.

It works if you work it. I promise!

LIFE IS A GIFT

BY RICKIE LEE NESBITT

This life is a gift, and so are you. Everything about you is just right and you are loved. Never be afraid to speak your truth; it is yours and no matter what anyone says to you they cannot take your voice away, unless you let them and that is the very last thing you ever want to do. Fear and shame will destroy you.

For most of my life I lived a double life, one side was the good daughter, student, grandchild and the other side was a broken lost angry drug addict that was constantly looking for her next fix. Once I got the taste of substances, I was hooked. Sadly, there was no going back for me and for over a good couple of decades my life revolved around being high, but enough to function. This is what we called a functioning drug addict!

Through those years I wasted so much money and opportunities, because all that mattered to me was that I was able to afford to feed my daughter etc, and cover my drug habit. Selling drugs became my way to cover my personal habit, but then that also got out of control and I found myself spiralling deeper into the addiction abyss, yet I still didn't see how I was hurting anyone... just myself!

I felt like I didn't deserve any better, I had no respect for my body or my soul. I was broken and all I knew was that drugs made me feel different.

I can't tell you not to do anything. What I can tell you is that if you are considering it, then know what is ahead. When you start taking drugs it's fun and you have a good time, but pretty soon the drugs wear off and you are left feeling like shit. The high is gone and you have to face reality. Soon you are looking forward to your next buzz, your next 'FUN' time! All of a sudden you have changed and your friends and family start to notice. You start to pull away; by now you are only focused on one thing, getting your next taste. You start hanging around with people who do drugs or sell drugs and slowly your true friends see and hear from you less and less. No longer are you the fun outgoing creative friend or the loving and helpful daughter or son that the ones you love most remember. Moody, withdrawn, erratic, disruptive, manic... this is just the tip of the iceberg! The hole hasn't even gotten deep yet. If you surround yourself with addicts, then all you will get is darkness.

When you are in the midst of active addiction, the last thing you believe, is that you actually are! I moved away from everyone I loved with my baby girl to the city and got lost. I sold my soul to survive and almost lost everything in the process. I got clean for a while but then went off the rails again. I got pregnant and got clean and life is great. Then my dad passed away and my family fell apart, so of course I hit the drugs and this time was the last time; the worst time. I lost my children, my teeth, my house, most of my belongings, my car, my licence, I was in big trouble with the law. There was a thin thread holding me to this earth.

I needed divine intervention!



Thankfully someone special came into my life, right at my lowest point, and made me see my life for what it was, chased away all of the users that I called my so-called friends and showed me that I was worth more. This is what I needed; to be shown how to value myself and have the courage to find the person I was always meant to be. Going cold Turkey off 'ice' was one of the toughest things I ever endured physically. It was torturing every part of me; my body ached, it was impossible not to wake up dripping in sweat shivering cold not being able to move. The cravings were doing my head in, but I knew it would not last forever.

Recovery is a selfish thing. You must only focus on yourself. Tunnel Vision.

I was on the way to sorting my shit out and nothing and nobody was going to stand in my way of claiming my life back.

I had many deep scars emotionally that needed to be addressed and learning how to cope with them was my first step in healing. Finding the right professional people to help me work on

myself was pivotal. My point is that you must work on yourself. You can't expect anybody else to do the work for you; my only way out of the darkness was to totally change the way that I looked at life, looked at my own life, how my choices led me to the paths that I went down. Even though I wasn't taught how to heal, once I was shown, the doors that opened for me I never imagined possible! It doesn't have to be like this; life can be better, but first you have to be gentle on yourself and let go of all the pain and accept the love.

For me, meditation, mindfulness, Law of Attraction and sound frequency music along with exercise, nature and good food were great tools I could do myself. You find what matches your soul and do it. Do the hard work, make amends for the things that you've done to the people that you care about, and by doing those little steps the light inside you starts to shine brighter. I am now clean off ice for going on six years and counting. I want everyone out there to know that anything's possible; you just have to trust that you're worth more.

THE FINAL STRAW

BY RICK BAYNE

RICK BAYNE SPEAKING TO PARTICIPANTS IN WRAD'S SLIDING DOORS
NON-RESIDENTIAL REHABILITATION PROGRAM

Having four children removed from her care was the final straw for Gill.

This was rock bottom, the time she realised she needed to do something or lose everything that was precious to her; her children, even her life.

Today Gill (not her real name) is the healthiest she has been for decades and enjoys the best relationship she's ever had with her children.

From despair and addiction has come hope and health.

Gill started using cannabis when she was 13, but by then she was already drinking alcohol. The alcohol and cannabis mix continued until her early 30s when, alongside her partner, she took her use to another level.

With methamphetamines, her life started to crumble. "It got so bad I ended up losing my kids because of it," Gill admits.

However, she started going to WRAD and her AOD counsellor suggested she try Sliding Doors. The turnaround has been staggering.

"I got into Sliding Doors and a few months later I got my two youngest back and then my other two girls," Gill said.

"We've never had such an amazing relationship. They see that I'm not the same person that I was. We can sit down and have a conversation and they can get their feelings out.

"The other day I was talking with my older daughters and they said they've never felt so supported by their mum in their whole life. For

them to say that to me, I know I'm now on the right path."

Gill admits she had been on the wrong path for a long time, and went totally off the rails when methamphetamines were introduced.

"I was with my ex-partner for 21 years but because of the drug use it got extremely toxic, very violent and abusive. We were both using; it got so bad that the school called DHHS and they took the kids."

At the time, Gill was devastated and knew she had to change. "I look at it as a positive thing now because of how much I have achieved," she says. "I'm no longer in that toxic, abusive relationship. I've found myself and become this person who is confident within herself and achieving new goals."

Losing her four youngest children was the catalyst. "I look at that as my rock bottom," Gill says.

She was extremely underweight, looking every bit the drug addict that she was, and her mental health was a mess.

"I was at the point where I was ready to end it all," she admits. "It was a combination of the drugs and the relationship I was in. By that stage I couldn't even go out and talk to other people without him getting angry and volatile. We were both using which was a recipe for disaster."

Gill concedes she had a lot of built-up anger and needed to deal with her troubled relationship and issues from her childhood.

"Those problems were why I starting drinking and using cannabis in the first place and then that led to meth. My partner starting using it first. That pressure of him using and me not using got me started and once I used it once, that was it I was hooked.



"Towards the end, it didn't matter how much I used, I couldn't get that feeling. You use and then the guilt and shame would start. I'd think 'why am I doing this to myself' but I couldn't stop."

Gill's addiction led to legal troubles and she was arrested for shoplifting. She has one unresolved court case relating to an incident in 2018 that was deferred because of COVID but hopes for a positive outcome. "I have a lot of letters of support now; these days I have a lot of support around me."

Gill attributes her new life to Sliding Doors. Her first stint was from September 2019 till January 2020 and she did well until the first COVID lockdown. "I had a bit of a lapse and smoked some cannabis but I got on to it and re-engaged with Sliding Doors and went through to December," she said. "I also started doing NA (Narcotics Anonymous) and that's a huge support network. I go to at least three or four meetings each week."

"Going into isolation, I didn't realise how much pressure I was putting on myself for not reaching out. I started ignoring the red flags and everything got on top of me.

"It was just cannabis and I only smoked once but I realised what was happening and put in measures and re-engaged with Sliding Doors."

The influence of Sliding Doors has been definitive. "The main thing is how it changed my thinking," Gill said. "I always thought I wasn't worth anything and deserved bad things to happen to me but they taught how to overcome those negative beliefs and how to deal with certain situations.

"I know now that you are entitled to have feelings and emotions; it's natural, everyone has them. It's all about how you respond to them."

Gill remains committed to NA. "I've made some really good supportive friends through that fellowship," she said. "It's still a priority. Once you go through Sliding Doors you still need something to keep focus on your recovery. You need to work on it every day."

These days, Gill can face her problems head on. "If I'm struggling, I've got people I can call, my sponsor, my NA members, and they help me work through it," she said.

"The best part about it is that there's no judgment when you walk into their meetings; there's acceptance."

Her health has done "a complete 180". "I'm healthy now; I eat three meals a day and I've put on weight. I do things for myself like getting my nails done or if I want something I go out and buy it because I'm not spending all my money on drugs. Self-care is a big thing for me."

Gill's bills are paid, she has money in the bank, she's bought a car and she's able to buy presents for her children.

She has also started studying a Certificate IV in Community Services, hoping to give back some of what she has received.

"I'm living a life I never thought I could," Gill said. "Recovery is amazing. I see people who are still using and feel empathy towards them because they haven't found what I have. I've been given back a life I never thought I'd have and to feel worthy of it is an amazing feeling."

JANE'S SALVATION

BY RICK BAYNE

RICK BAYNE SPEAKING TO PARTICIPANTS IN WRAD'S SLIDING DOORS
NON-RESIDENTIAL REHABILITATION PROGRAM

Jane thought that returning to her hometown Warrnambool in her mid-30s was an admission of defeat.

Instead, it turned out to be her salvation.

Jane, not her real name, had been away from Warrnambool for nearly two decades, mostly living in a whirl of alcohol and drugs.

"I class my addiction as something quite ferocious," she says. "Once I started, I couldn't stop."

Returning to Warrnambool was a desperate move, a last chance to control the addictions that were running her health and her life.

A 12-step program, Narcotics Anonymous and residential rehab had helped but hadn't tamed the beast.

At the end of 2019, Jane returned to Warrnambool to live with her parents for the first time since departing 18 years earlier to study in Melbourne. Soon after she started WRAD's Sliding Doors program and 18 months later she is clean, confident and healthy.

"What I thought was going to be a very dreary situation, is now full of life and happiness," she said.

Jane's story of addiction starts like so many others; alcohol at 14, recreational drugs at 15 and cocaine and ice at 22. "When I started using the heavier drugs, I was pretty much addicted," she said.

She resisted the temptation of harder drugs until 22, even though they were around her in the workplace and in her relationships. Jane had experienced sexual assault and her drug-using partner had become abusive. Drugs were a way of

coping with a toxic environment, but Jane doesn't blame anyone else.

"It took some time for me to start but once it took a hold, I was the one who wanted it," she said.

"I believe I was predisposed to it. I knew from when I was quite young that I had an addictive personality and a tendency to obsess and be compulsive about things."

Hard drugs had a terrible impact on her life. She lost 20 kilos in a few months and was unemployable and isolated.

Jane tried to mask the situation and show a functional facade to the world.

"I knew that I looked terrible, that I was becoming someone I didn't want to be, so I began to turn around the externals. I made myself put on weight to make myself not look like a drug addict.

On the outside people thought I was getting better, but inside I was exactly the same."

Jane broke up with her partner, but that didn't ease her addiction. "I was desperate. I couldn't work out why I was still using, even though I wanted to stop. I had thought once he left, I'd be able to stop but it wasn't him influencing me to use, I was the one wanting to do it.

"It had become a coping mechanism – I couldn't keep blaming others."

Jane came to realise she couldn't recover on her own. "I'd become extremely isolated, pretty much an anxious hermit, and I needed to get out of that and do something about it."

When she turned 32, Jane started attending 12 steps Narcotics Anonymous meetings. "That was very beneficial; it was the first time I became consistent with anything and started to get some clean time," she said.



IMAGE:
Butterfly Tears
by Fiona Clarke,
commissioned for
WRAD's Tears of
Hope booklet

"Going to a place like 12 Steps and being able to see others like me that were now clean was an important step. That was a huge realisation that there was hope for people who were heavily addicted."

But more steps were needed. "I was getting cleaner for longer periods but couldn't work out why I kept on relapsing," Jane said.

She tried six months in residential rehab in Melbourne. Again, this was beneficial but not a panacea. She relapsed after completing the program and a new relationship with a live-in partner fell apart.

"I was still addressing trauma issues, so living with a man and his son was difficult. I was in a safe environment but my brain was having flashbacks."

That's when she decided to move back to Warrnambool to live with her parents.

"I knew I'd be safe but moving back home was a last resort for me. I'd always said I'd only do it if I couldn't fix the problem. It was quite defeating.

"Moving to Melbourne was for job opportunities and study and a life where I would be independent and successful; moving back here was the opposite of that."

But there was a silver lining. Jane began attending NA and was told about Sliding Doors.

The WRAD program helped to reconfigure her outlook on life.

"Now I think it's better to live here, but I didn't at the time," Jane said. "I've definitely turned that around by doing Sliding Doors. If Sliding Doors hadn't been there, things could be quite different and I wouldn't have progressed in my recovery as I have."

Jane says the program's focus on cognitive behavioural therapy and how to apply that to her life was the catalyst for change. "That was a huge turning point because I was very negative and anxious and I think that had a lot to do with my relapses. I could take what I learnt in the program and understand how to slow down the process if I felt I was going to relapse...I could see where I was going wrong and the distorted belief systems that were driving me that way."

Jane did the program full time till July 2020 and then for two days a week for another six months, with repetition reinforcing the messages.

"They like you to keep going and be a peer member to encourage others," she said.

"That was hugely helpful for me and them and I could feel the change while doing the program. When I was repeating it the second and third time it was really sinking in. I could see my behaviour change, and reframe my negativity into a positive."

MAKING UP FOR LOST TIME

BY RICK BAYNE

RICK BAYNE SPEAKING TO PARTICIPANTS IN WRAD'S SLIDING DOORS
NON-RESIDENTIAL REHABILITATION PROGRAM

Ruth never got to see her daughter roll over for the first time or make her first tentative crawl.

Instead, she was either in jail or a meth-induced state that wasn't fit for parenting.

Ruth (not her real name), realises she can't retrieve those precious moments but she now appreciates every minute she shares with her daughter.

After five years of addiction and several stints in jail, Ruth has been clean for 20 months and has finally become a good mum.

"That's enough to give me motivation to stay clean," she said. "Our bonding attachment is amazing. Even child protection said they were impressed with how we bonded."

Her baby was removed from her care at birth and Ruth now realises child protection authorities had no choice.

"I had been in addiction for about five years and in and out of jail," she said.

Ruth had been using a cocktail of pills but was coerced into using meth while in a troubled and abusive relationship.

"He said I'm going to light this and if you don't smoke it, it's going to be wasted and I'm going to be angry," Ruth said. "My options were smoke the meth or get beaten so I chose the meth and from there on it spiralled downhill."

Ruth's ribs and jaw were broken in a terrifying incident, prompting her to use more heavily. Depression and anxiety became severe, she lost her job, cut off friends and left school.

Ruth went to jail for possessing and trafficking methamphetamines, but that didn't stop her.

"I went to jail and then did the same shit all over again and was back in jail within three months. I was arrested three times in three days for possession of meth."

During a stint out of jail she entered a new relationship and fell pregnant. This could have been her salvation, but it wasn't.

"That's when things got really hard. I knew when I got pregnant that I should stop using but I just couldn't. There was no support put in place to help me. It was like a taboo subject; everyone would report it but put nothing in place to try to stop it."

She knew before giving birth that she wouldn't be able to keep her child.

"I gave birth on a Friday night and she was put in care of the hospital and taken off me the next Saturday."

She was a healthy baby but with complications caused by Ruth's drug use. "She had no birth problems but she was having minor tremors from withdrawals, which was really hard. I get a bit emotional talking about it now."

Sixteen days after giving birth, her partner was jailed. Ruth knew what she needed to do to get access to her daughter but having no child and no partner made it worse.

Access visits were often under a cloud of drugs, making it hard to bond with her child.

"Getting clean seemed like an impossible task," Ruth admitted.

Two and a half months after her partner was jailed, Ruth was also locked up for trafficking. For five hard months, she had no access to her daughter.

Her partner was the first to clean up his act, and when Ruth was released from jail, she was ordered to attend rehab as a condition of a three-year corrections order.

NOW I ACCEPT MY PAST AND LOOK FORWARD TO THE FUTURE"

Her corrections officer referred her to the Sliding Doors non-residential rehabilitation program at WRAD and finally there was a light on the horizon.

"I thought when I got out of jail it was as simple don't use, but it wasn't that simple," Ruth said. "There were triggers left, right and centre; people rocking up at my house and things going on but all I wanted was my baby. I didn't want to be the old me, but that's what people expected."

That's where Sliding Doors came in. "Having that support, I was able to recognise my triggers, to see high-risk situations and avoid putting myself in them."

Ruth says Sliding Doors' focus on cognitive behavioural therapy helped her to learn about her thoughts, feelings and behaviour.

"They showed me how my thoughts led to my behaviour and how we could challenge those thoughts when we get them," she said.

"I discovered things about myself and how to change my core beliefs and how to communicate without yelling, because that's how I thought I could be heard."

COVID was another challenge and the Sliding Doors team was essential in helping Ruth through a difficult time.

"They handled COVID amazingly," she said. "Offering support for addicts on a virtual platform is really hard, but they did it."

Ruth had been getting one-hour access to her daughter three times a week. "It was hard getting out and staying clean, but my reward was to see my daughter," she said.

However, during COVID visits were cut for two months because the child's carer had diabetes and was considered high risk. "That was one of my biggest triggers," Ruth said. "Having that taken away from me was excruciating. If I didn't have Sliding Doors and my clinician at WRAD who went above and beyond to support me through it, I don't think I'd be clean today."

After completing the program and not using drugs, Ruth fought to bring her daughter home.

She was initially granted six overnight stays over a two-week period and was then given a six-month preservation order where her daughter was home but child protection services checked regularly and Ruth was screened for drugs. The order expired in January. Ruth's daughter has now been in the family home since July, two weeks after her first birthday.

Ruth is rightly proud of her achievements. "It was a lot of hard work but Sliding Doors gave me the skills and tools to be able to get to where I am," she said. "The best part about Sliding Doors is that once you finish, they just don't shut you off. I know that if I'm having a bad day I can call."

Ruth has also been attending WRAD's WARP peer support group and Narcotics Anonymous and continues appointments with her AOD clinician at WRAD. She's also studying a Certificate IV in Child, Youth and Family Intervention. "I share bits and pieces about my addiction and recovery and people tell me they find that very useful. That makes me feel good."

Ruth has been clean for 20 months and her partner is two-years clean and back at work and playing football.

"I'd be lying if I said I never feel like smoking meth but now I have that support and the tools and strategies to deal with it," Ruth said.

"We have our own little family that we both cherish and keep together. I feel healthier and can function and have a better understanding of being a mum."

"I've been able to accept that I'm an addict and even though I haven't used for 20 months, that doesn't make me any less of an addict."

"Sliding Doors taught me it's ok to have these emotions. I had a lot of guilt and shame around being an addict and that I had used in my pregnancy and had my daughter taken off me, but there's nothing I can do to change my prior actions."

"Now I accept my past and look forward to the future."



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