

Russell, a young Toronto man reaches out for help in his struggle to understand and overcome his drug abuse problem.

In Spring of 1996, I attended my first "Finally Understanding Narcotics" Group meeting at the Parkdale Community Health Centre. Around that same time, the Parkdale rooming house where I was land lord became the subject of much debate in the community. The house had a continual flow of people through the building. In my area it is easy to obtain drugs, and this house became a safe place where for the most part homeless people came to consume them.

I also soon found myself abusing drugs to the point where my life became completely chaotic. I stopped eating properly, and my weight dropped, my sleep patterns were disrupted, and I became unable to clearly focus on the simple issues of day- to-day living.

At that time, I began rooming with a woman who was also a drug user, and it was she introduced me to the Group. She explained that this Group was sponsored by the Community Health Centre and that people could attend and get something to eat. I soon found that the Group was more than just a place to get a good meal.

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Through attending the Group, I was able to gain more understanding of my drug use. Through our lively discussions which took place at the weekly meetings, I found out about the literature available, about harm reduction theories and various things that have enabled me to more clearly understand what I it was that I was facing. I also had Carol Polych, a nurse who was instrumental in starting the Group six years ago was always there to provided me with the answers to many questions I had about the effects of the various drugs I was using and to help me understand how my lifestyle was affecting my health.

After talking with other more experienced users in the Group, I learned how to inject "Crack" using less caustic substances than vinegar. With Carol's help I learned how to inject safely, and this has saved me much pain and physical damage. Although I continued to use drugs, I found that the information and support of the Group participants helped me to use more carefully and with less harm to myself and others. I continued to attend the Group regularly throughout the summer, meeting people in the neighbourhood who were dealing with the same issues as I was.

I found out about the Needle Exchange Program at the Health Centre and became a regular client of it. Again the availability of Safer Drug Use and Safer Sex Literature as well as the ability to have informed discussions with the Outreach staff ensured that I used my drugs of choice in a competent manner.

Getting Clean & Staying Clean

After a time, my house became the subject of much media attention because it became identified as one of the most active "crack houses" in the neighbourhood. After a series of police raids that I attended as well with the local building department, we agreed to board up the house to prevent people from entering it. This forced the eviction of all the tenants who were dealing drugs, as well as the one or two who weren't. Unfortunately, this also left me in the situation of having no place to live myself.

It was through the efforts of Eric Carrier, one of the Outreach workers at the Street Outreach Program at the Health Centre, I was able to secure residence at a men's hostel -- Glendale house, part of the Out of the Cold Program. This solved my housing problem but still left me with the issues that had led to my homelessness in the first place. It was then that I began speaking to Walter Cavalieri, a social worker at the Health Centre. He helped me to understand the significant role drugs were playing in my life; and I realised that what I once viewed as a recreation had become an obsession.

In October I checked into a detoxification centre in Toronto and stayed for five days. After detoxing I endeavoured to stay "clean"; however this proved to be more difficult than I had anticipated. I continued to talk with Walter on a weekly basis, and together we searched for and ultimately found a suitable treatment program. Walter also helped me to stay in communication with my family after I had informed them of the situation I was in.

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I then attended a short-term residential drug treatment program called the New Port Centre in Port Colborne Ontario and upon my return moved back into Glendale House. Since returning to Toronto I have continued to regularly attend the Finally Understanding Narcotics meetings and often help to shop for, prepare and serve the food.

Nevertheless, I was still quite anxious to live on my own again, so I ended up moving into a rooming house close to Parkdale. This move was not a good idea. Several friends whom I used to use drugs with would drop by, and I began to use again intermittently. I discussed these issues at the meetings and continued to get non-judgemental feedback from the Group members.

With the groups weekly support and understanding, I have managed to move from the rooming house and am now staying in a "dry" residence. To this day, I have not used drugs at all for close to sixty days and so far am successful in suppressing the urge to use. I now regularly volunteer at the Daily Bread Food Bank and am involved in several programs to distribute information to homeless, underhoused and economically disadvantaged people in Toronto.

I can tell you that for me, if it were not for the Street Outreach / Harm Reduction Team of Calvin, Tracey, Eric and Ed at Parkdale Community Health Centre, and particularly the Finally Understanding Narcotics Group, I might have continued to use drugs and still be living in chaos. They helped me get educated, they helped me get strong, and finally they helped me to not be self-destructive and find my way to stay clean.