

Woman fighting her way back from a living hell

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Michelle Mersereau, 27, is halfway through her one-year rehab program at the Sarah Tracy Centre for Women in Tracy. She said thanks to the help she's receiving there, she's been able to come back from the living hell she was in as a result of her drug addiction.

Photo: James West/The Daily Gleaner

There are big changes happening in the lives of women who've been calling the Sarah Tracy Centre for Women home for the past six months.

Some who arrived when the centre opened are halfway through their year-long treatment at the facility in Tracy, located 40 minutes from Fredericton.

Michelle Melanson, 27, became addicted to painkillers after she had her wisdom teeth removed when she was 18. That led to a downward spiral of addiction to street drugs, including cocaine and crack.

She came to the centre as an alternative to being incarcerated after she got involved in credit card theft to finance her habit, she said.

Working through addiction is one of the most difficult journeys anyone can take, she said. Self-medicating with drugs is a way of avoiding painful past experiences, she said.

While here, she said, she's gone through holistic treatment designed to heal women emotionally, physically and spiritually with the support of the centre's staff.

Melanson doesn't look like she did six months ago. At that time she was frail. A wholesome diet and a daily exercise regiment has transformed her into a physically fit, strong woman.

"I usually train for about an hour and a half every day. I am constantly working out. That's my thing. Physically I can endure so much more. I don't feel brittle anymore. When you're using (drugs) a lot, you feel like you could snap in half. You feel really weak and now I feel like I'm on top of the world. I can do anything."

Before she came to the centre she lost all of her teeth after she was attacked on the streets.

"Three guys jumped me and they broke my jaw and they messed up my face pretty bad. So when I came here I didn't have any teeth."

The once self-conscious woman wouldn't smile openly. Recently she received dental implants. She cried tears of joy when she saw her reflection when she first looked in a mirror, she said. Now she smiles without hesitation.

Six months ago, she said, she was nervous. Now she is calm and focused on a future brighter than she dared dream while she was doing drugs daily on the streets. Now she is able to return home on furloughs to visit with her family.

"When I go home on the weekends it's hard because I've changed but nobody else has. The good thing is that I've been taught so many skills and how to deal with that. They know that's what's going to happen so they prepare you for it."

Her family is noticing the changes in her, she said.

Melanson is looking forward to graduating from the program in the next several months. She's eager to earn her GED and move on to community college. Last summer she spoke of becoming an event planner and tour guide. Her vision for her future includes owning a business.

She also hopes someday to be live permanently with her children and their father.

“Our hope is to be a family again but we can’t be a family until I am better. I just want my family back. I want a life. I just want to live. I’ve been in the depths of hell ... My kids are my main thing. I just want a better life for them.”

Some of the women have voluntarily left the program. The staff knows that coming to the centre doesn’t necessarily mean staying and going through the journey of healing. However, they’re dedicated to giving these women the tools they need to give them their best shot at success.

“If you want to get clean, you have to really want it bad enough. I had to go even further than rock-bottom before I was ready. I would get on my hands and knees and beg. I said to my mom a couple of weeks before I got clean ‘I just need to go somewhere in the middle of nowhere that I can just get clean and I can stay there for a year.’ ”

Coming to the Sarah Tracy Centre for Women was literally an answer to prayer, she said. For anyone who wants a shot at becoming clean and getting a second chance at life, she said, this is the place to do get it.

Terry Zaichkowski, the centre’s clinical director, said it’s normal for some people who come into rehab not to stay.

“One in 10 addicts come for help and out of that one in 10 make it. They’ll come back and try again. Sometimes they’re just not ready. Sometimes they’ll say they had to hit rock-bottom. I always say there’s another bottom below that one.”

The door is open for them to return and try again after a three-month waiting period, which allows the women time to think about what it means to go through rehabilitation and whether they want to do the work.

“It’s huge. Imagine changing your entire life. Your friends, the way you relate to people. What you do every day. How you speak, how you think. So if you’re not really wanting it, it’s just too much.”

Presently it’s working with five women who are in various stages of their rehabilitation from a variety of addictions.

Zaichkowski said the hardest thing the women who come here have to deal with is the change of environment because addiction really thrives in chaos and “this building is all about structure.”

The women here go through withdrawal from their chemical addictions but also withdrawal from their previous lives that included toxic relationships and environments. When it takes time for the women to adapt to the centre’s calm, supportive caring atmosphere. Gradually, she said, through the program

and the mentorship provided the women start to trust and come to see their new normal as a path toward a better lifestyle, which, when they're ready to leave the centre will give them the tools to lead an addiction-free life that includes a job and a home, she said.

"I think it's really important work that we're doing here. It's too bad there aren't more long-term recovery programs."

The centre opened in July. The first women to leave here will likely do so next summer once they've completed therapy.

The province has invested up to \$136,000 in the centre, which employs 14 people. The centre is operated by Bridges of Canada, a non-profit, faith-based organization, which provides support through a holistic program that embraces education, vocation, life skills, 12-step programming, therapeutic counselling and spiritual care. It's the first rehabilitation program of its kind in the country.