

BEYOND HER WILDEST DREAMS

Addiction destroyed her career in performing arts. At Higher Ground she faced a deep well of sadness, regret and guilt. Now eight years drug-free, she is again doing the work she loves. A Higher Ground graduate's anonymous story.

I arrived on the doorstep of Higher Ground eight years ago weighing just over 40 kg and looking like death warmed up. I had been using drugs for 30 years and I was completely sick and tired of being sick and tired.

Like most addicts I grew up feeling terminally different, but it was exacerbated by the fact that my early years were different.

When my mother got pregnant my father took off overseas and did not return and marry her until I was four years old. My mother went to live with her mother in Wellington, and I grew up the centre of attention in a household of five women who adored and spoiled me.

In my father's extended family, though, I felt unwanted. Then when my parents married and we became a nuclear family, my two brothers arrived in quick succession and, no longer the centre of attention, I became babysitter and household helper.

Craved Acceptance

I went to nine primary schools, and learned the only way to break into tight knit bands of girls was to be naughty and funny. I craved acceptance and so wanted to be good, but if I wanted friends I had to do the opposite.

I went to Catholic schools but my parents had been excommunicated for divorcing. So in my early school days the nuns terrified me with stories that my parents would burn in hell for all eternity and I'd have to go to heaven alone.

When I was 10, I was enrolled in a school where I stayed until I was 16. This was the happiest time of my childhood and I formed lasting friendships for the first time. I was still naughty but I fell in with a bright group of girls for whom academic achievement was a given, and we had some excellent teachers.

I tried alcohol at 13, hated the taste but loved the effect. The other girls would take one sip and say how disgusting it was. I would agree but drink it to the very last drop.

Small Town Life

When I was 16 my grandmother fell ill and I had to leave school and Auckland and all my friends to go with my family to her small town and start a new life.

I really didn't fit in there. It seemed like everyone hated me because I was a snobby, private school girl. I got a job in a government department, and started to sleep around and drink heavily. I was a complete brat to my parents because I felt they had ruined my life and I was going to make them pay.

I slept with someone else's boyfriend and to spite me the girl told me I was a bastard and my father was not my real father. Not true. But I fell into a deep depression and was prescribed valium. I instantly discovered that the more I took the more I could block out reality, and was addicted within six weeks. Then my prescription was stopped. It was awful coming off valium, but I just drank more.

When my parents could no longer legally keep me

at home, I took off out of there on my 18th birthday.

Auckland, 1970, L.S.D. and Buddha sticks, I had come home at last! It was easy to get work and I had a good reference from the government. I started flatting and living commune-style with student doctors and we seemed to have abundant supplies of all sorts of experimental drugs.

I had an aspiration to go to a performing arts school in Paris and always at the back of my mind that was where I was going to end up. I joined a theatre company that was just starting up in Auckland and toured schools. It was hard work and long hours but I still managed to play hard as well.

At 23 I left N.Z for Sydney, thinking I could save more money there to further my dream. I couldn't get any theatre work in Sydney, so I started doing cabaret and alternative theatre. But I had time on my hands and tried my first heroin. I loved it immediately and managed to be a weekend addict for a while, then the weekends got closer together.

Kings Cross Stripper

I became a stripper on Kings Cross to pay for my drugs as well as save to get to Paris. Through all of this I had managed to get a following as an alternative style cabaret artist. My supporters put on benefit concerts and I had some awfully generous friends who helped me on my way.

At 26 I finally had my air fare and my first term's tuition to one of the world's leading dramatic art schools.

I thought if I was fulfilling my fantasy I wouldn't need hard drugs anymore and for a short time it was almost enough. The school was hard though, a strict regime, no translators, you either spoke French or you didn't speak at all. My French was schoolgirl and I was not up to talking about emotions. I floundered and I became very unhappy. I was cleaning the apartment of a woman whose husband had just died of cancer and found boxes of pethedine in the bathroom cabinet. Over three months I used them all and I was addicted.

I was kicked out of school for lack of concentration. The end of the dream.

I went back to London, did some alternative theatre, used drugs sporadically and then started doing peep shows, very degrading. The only way I could do that was by using heroin first. I did dismal street theatre tours of Europe, and would give up heroin on these tours but drink alcohol and smoke lots of marijuana. I still I had no idea I was an addict.

Pregnant And Withdrawing

I found myself pregnant and my parents sent my airfare home. I stopped cold turkey; my mother had never seen anyone suffer such awful morning sickness.

I had a gorgeous, healthy baby boy. When he was six weeks old and I was reunited with his father we toured a successful play. Over the next 10 years, I would get blind drunk and make a fool of myself on opening nights and parties, but kept on trucking. Then the work dried up - I was fired for not pulling my weight artistically, and I was unreliable.

I started to drink more heavily until I was getting up at eight, sending my son off to school, going to one of three pubs locally and drinking all day, selling very underweight deals of marijuana to facilitate my alcohol consumption.

Just One More

At six o'clock, my son would start calling me to say he was hungry. I'd say "just one more, be home soon darling", and finally he'd come to get me. Someone would feed him at the buffet and someone else would pour me into a taxi and we'd struggle home.

My parents were worried. They were forever bailing me out by paying bills, buying groceries, clothing my boy. I spoiled his chances of getting into a good school by going to the pub before his interview. That was the last straw for my parents, and they started threatening to take him away. A friend was nine months drug-free and took me to meet Higher Ground's social worker. I felt safe to tell her about my history. I qualified as an addict. I booked into Detox. and started my treatment at Higher Ground within days of that first meeting.

I spent the first three weeks in Higher Ground in tears. If anyone looked at me, I cried. It was a very deep well of sadness, regret and guilt.

I stayed at Higher Ground and thrived, put on weight and started the painful process of getting back the trust of my son and family. I explored my shame, grief and family issues and felt a glimmer of hope that I could live without using drugs and alcohol.

Higher Ground was the starting point and Narcotics Anonymous meetings have been the mainstay of my recovery. Hearing the stories of other addicts and not feeling terminally different, knowing I don't have to use to feel OK about being me is such a relief.

Help Where I Can

Eight years later, I attend meetings regularly, do service in my Fellowship and stay close to Higher Ground, helping where I can.

I'm back doing the things I love. I have a career beyond my wildest dreams and my son has just graduated in his trade. My true friends are all back in my life and I have some fabulous new ones through Higher Ground and N.A.

I never knew what was wrong with me: it is such a relief to know I'm an addict and that there is a solution."☞

Taking Care of the Physical

Higher Ground's sports coordinator for the past six years is Chris Christensen. Chris has a Bachelor of Sport and Recreation degree and works in sports event management. She comes to Higher Ground for two hours, twice a week to lead the sports programme.

Chris works with clients on some of the physical components of wellbeing in recovery. Plus it's fun, says Chris. "We laugh – a lot."

Chris has modified and simplified the rules of common, non-contact team games such as touch, netball, basketball and volleyball so that everyone can play. For example, women have to make every second score so that men pass the ball to women.

She chooses team sports because they build relationships. "That is what Higher Ground is all about," says Chris. "Recovery is about learning to trust each other, not to laugh at other people, no put-downs, being supportive, dealing with conflict and competitiveness. Players have to handle being on the losing side and equally, they have to deal with being on the winning side. All those things go on in a game."

Exercise gives clients an outlet for physical feelings as well as showing people that they can be active even when they are experiencing strong feelings.

For her degree, Chris completed a research paper on Higher Ground. It was clear that people in early recovery slept and relaxed better if they exercised.

"I've always known the physiological aspects of sport. You go out there and run around, it raises your heart rate which increases your blood flow to your body, moves toxins, increases your lung capacity and therefore the oxygen supply to your brain. In terms of health, are they going to get fitter? Yes. But what most people don't know is the emotional side.

"You learn to change through sport. You learn how to support people, how to give people good feedback, you learn how to appreciate others in a team, how to be a team player. You learn humility every time you step up to the ball. You learn to challenge what you think you know and what you think you can and can't do. The pay-off is that you get to feel better about yourself."

With Higher Ground's changing client base, Chris has to balance the needs of the most active young methamphetamine addicts with the least participant and often older narcotics users, and find a middle ground.

In team games they have to deal with being the focus of attention and feeling self-conscious. Yet when clients first arrive they may have poor hand-eye coordination and may find throwing and catching a ball difficult. They react different ways. People either have a go, or just not want to try because they're scared of looking stupid.

There are connections to be made for clients between how they behave in sport and how they behave in their lives. By consistently challenging themselves to try when they think they can't do something, people start to change. "I love watching clients grow from day one.

"They arrive embedded in addiction and then four months later they're running around the sports field and have got over some of their hurdles," says Chris.

"I have the ultimate respect for what they achieve because the expectations on the field are quite high. I'm not a counsellor and I come into the treatment centre with normal expectations and they stand up

continued overleaf...

To Live and Grow

Higher Ground's second support house, Margate, in Blockhouse Bay offers longer-term accommodation and support for five graduates.

This is in addition to Higher Ground's existing Calgary support house in Sandringham. Together they provide a safe and supportive environment for graduates from Higher Ground's residential programme as they integrate back into the community.

Residents live in a positive way with other people recovering from drug dependency while maintaining the changes necessary to stay drug-free long-term.

Residents are supported by Higher Ground's After Care programme and counsellors, and by each other, as they solidify their recovery support systems and rebuild their lives.

Underpinning the philosophy of Higher Ground are the recovery principles of honesty, open-mindedness, willingness, faith, hope, respect, generosity and gratitude which are the foundations of healing and a new life.

"Addiction to alcohol and other drugs is a very disabling and disempowering experience," says Johnny. "The most important message to all our clients and their families is that change is possible. Strong support, increased self-confidence and a balanced recovery plan are the cornerstones for quality recovery."

and meet them. All I ask is they give it their best shot."

New Higher Ground clients are often still suffering from the physical trauma of withdrawing from drugs when they arrive.

Says programme director Stuart Anderson: "The reality is they come from a physical, spiritual, emotional and intellectual desert. They need to replenish or refill each of those dimensions to be able to participate in the Higher Ground programme and eventually to become active members of society again."

New clients are seen by a doctor to identify health issues that will impact on their on-going recovery. Many clients need dental work for painful problems which if left unattended may send them back to active addiction.

"In active addiction they start to self-medicate and self-diagnose and don't seek help because it means investing money and time in something other than drugs," says Stuart.

Clients arrive with poor eating, sleeping and fitness habits. While some people in active addiction do no exercise, others exercise to excess. Some have eating disorders. Some are depressed and unable to participate.

Recovery means learning new and healthy routines such as going to bed and getting up at a reasonable time, having a shower and eating breakfast every morning, sitting down with other people for three balanced meals a day and doing some exercise.

"We are very fortunate to have had Chris involved for a long time," says Stuart. "With her qualifications she can assess people's physical health and abilities and match activities to meet their needs."

With better physical health, clients start to look better. "That reinforces the understanding that recovery is not just about stopping drugs it's about living life," says Stuart. "If all you ever do is stop taking drugs it won't be long before you're taking drugs again. *H*

How to Make a Referral to Higher Ground

Higher Ground welcomes self-referrals.

Health, social and legal professionals wishing to make a referral to *Higher Ground* should note that our admission criteria require residents to be over 20 years of age, have a primary diagnosis of alcohol or other drug dependence, an interest in 12 Step recovery and a drug free status on admission.

Referrals or self referrals can be made by contacting Kathy Mildon at *Higher Ground* for a pre-admission assessment appointment on weekdays between 8.30am and 4.00pm.

Assessments in prisons, detox facilities or hospital can be arranged. Applicants who have outstanding legal charges are considered on a case by case basis. If required, *Higher Ground* can organise a medical detox through referral to the Auckland Regional Alcohol and Drug Services.

Making a Donation

Higher Ground is a registered Charitable Trust. Donations over \$5.00 are tax deductible and may be sent direct to *Higher Ground*.

Higher Ground is dependent on charitable donations for the continuation of its programme.

We hope you have enjoyed this issue of the *Higher Ground* News.

If you do not wish to remain on our mailing list, or are incorrectly listed, please write to HGDRT, 46 St Georges Bay Rd, Parnell, Auckland.

For further information about the *Higher Ground* rehabilitation programme phone Programme Director, Stuart Anderson 09-302 2315 or fax 09-302 2334 email hgdrt@xtra.co.nz

Higher Ground Drug Rehabilitation Trust
46 St Georges Bay Rd, Parnell Auckland
Ph 0-9-302 2315 Fax 0-9-302 2334

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