

# IT'S NEVER TOO LATE

Higher Ground now can provide residential treatment to prisoners from all over New Zealand under a contract with Department of Corrections.

"I think that everyone deserves a chance," says Higher Ground Community Team Manager Maree Matthews. "It's really worth it if clients become the person they were meant to be. It's never too late to do that."

Martin Mariota, Department of Corrections Senior Advisor for Contracted Rehabilitation Programmes, says 13 additional community residential beds were purchased in 2017 to support people in Department of Corrections care with high alcohol and other drug needs. Higher Ground manages three of these 13 beds.

"There is a high demand for this service which is reflected through the consistent volume of referrals for the Higher Ground treatment programme," he says. "As a result, occupancy in these beds has been at full capacity and we are very appreciative of the high quality service that Higher Ground provides for the people in our care."

Higher Ground gets a large number of requests for treatment from people in custody all around New Zealand. Many have to be declined because of lack of resources and time. But Higher Ground can now take people from prisons further away than Higher Ground staff can drive.

Pre-admission interviewing can be done through a secure video link at the Department of Corrections. A Parole Board hearing will decide if a prisoner can be released into treatment. Usually a



Higher Ground Community Team Manager Maree Matthews

condition of sentence has been to complete some kind of alcohol and other drug intervention or treatment.

"If they have been in and out of prison a long time they get burnt out," she says. "The clients that we've been seeing have had enough of the cycle, it's been jail, jail, jail, no family life, they haven't been there for their kids, partners, parents, so this opportunity is really life changing."

"I like to work with clients who have taken part in a drug treatment programme in prison because that is a therapeutic community where they have a warm-up to recovery and I find that they settle better. We've had clients that have done no treatment at all and they've done really well here too."

The culture of a therapeutic community is challenging, and not just for clients coming out of prison. "They may be confronted by the style of communication in Higher Ground where people talk about their feelings, because in prison there are so many masks on for survival."

Treatment at Higher Ground is a chance to break the cycle. "So many people don't have support when they get released and that's when recidivist offending keeps happening because doors are closed, they don't have money, a lot of them struggle to even get on a benefit because they don't have ID, they

*Continued on back page*

# From Prison to Life Drug-Free

He arrived at Higher Ground straight from prison and was the first Department of Corrections client to graduate and stay drug-free. Now two years later he's telling his story to help others.

“It was my fourth prison sentence and I was coming up to nearly 10 years in jail when I thought about going to Higher Ground.

Every time I'd been to prison I would try to manipulate the Parole Board to get out. I would promise my family the world but my addiction was too strong and every time I relapsed and then re-offended which always took me back to prison within a couple of months.

When my partner became pregnant with my son I thought it was good enough reason for me to stop using. I did all right for a while, but only because I thought it was not all right for her to smoke or inject meth while she was pregnant, but as soon as my son was born I had another reason to get fried again and get high.

My addiction was too strong, stronger than my love for my son at the time and I quickly spiraled back into the criminal lifestyle and the cycle of relapse and re-offending. I was sentenced to a further four years eight months in prison (for burglary, conspiracy to commit aggravated robbery, organised crime).

Put it this way, recently I've lost relationships due to my Google history, that's how bad my criminal record is. I got sentenced to prison along with my son's mother.

That was a pivotal time – both of us being in prison and the kids being out there in the care of her family. My son was six months old. Losing him changed my life, eventually.

I did not see my son the whole time I was in prison. When I got out he was four and a half.

I knew that everything I thought I had done to 'improve' my family situation through crime and proceeds of crime (that's how delusional my thinking was) actually destroyed my family and took my family away. I used methamphetamine to cover up the feelings of being a criminal, and the guilt about all my victims and letting my family down.

I grew up in West Auckland with mum and dad who were serious alcoholics. Nightly my mum and dad would drink with their friends and us kids were neglected. Weekly or nightly when my dad's friends left, we would have to hear my dad put the music up loud and beat my mother. We would sleep in the hall so we could run out and protect her. That built a lot of resentment towards my family.

We were never encouraged to have goals and work towards them or encouraged to do well at school, just to be children seen and not heard.

My two older sisters went to live in the UK as soon as they could leaving me alone to deal with my parents when I was 11 or 12.

I wasn't enjoying school, I hung around with the bad kids, never achieved anything, always ashamed of my parents drinking so I never brought my friends home. I was an angry little kid.

I started stealing money from mum's purse, stealing little things around the neighbourhood. At 17 I went to live with my other sister who was cooking methamphetamine, and that's when my meth using started.

I was a sales rep. before my addiction took over. I spent a bit of time in the UK with my sisters and had my 20th birthday in Barcelona. I was drug-free over there, life was really amazing. My goal was to go back to New Zealand and save enough money to go back to the UK.

*“People say you get the life beyond your wildest dreams in recovery, and I'm living an amazing life I thought I'd never live clean and healthy.”*

My parents convinced me to move back with them which brought up a lot of resentments. I did what was comfortable and familiar and got back onto the meth. Within six months I was in jail, had my 21st birthday in prison and spent the next 15 years using drugs.

For a while I lived with one of my sisters and her family. I was clean, my parents were now grandparents and had stopped drinking, and life was amazing. But a month before the end of my home detention, my old associates were coming out of jail and I relapsed and re-offended. I started injecting and things got really bad. That's when I met my son's mother. She was on a path to destruction, that's what attracted her to me.

I've been in high security at Auckland South Corrections Facility at Wiri. Two years maximum

security and minimum security at Auckland Prison at Paremoremo. Medium security at Waikeria Prison. Spring Hill Corrections Facility. The most violent jail was Hawkes Bay Regional Prison high security at Mangaroa – there were beatings, a murder, attempted murder, two suicides while I was there.

After three and a half years, I went before the Parole Board. I surprised myself by saying, “I am an addict and I need help and if you release me I'll relapse and re-offend, I know that.”

They stood me down for another year for me to seek help. I was desperate. My parents were alcoholics and I'd never wanted to end up like them, but I was a meth addict now with a broken family of my own. I didn't know what path my son's mother was on.

My first step I knew was to reach out to the Drug Treatment Unit (DTU) at Spring Hill prison. I had to get transferred from Mangaroa so I wrote to Spring Hill every week until someone responded. I got

*Continued on back page*

# 32 Years of Dedication, Wisdom and Vision

Higher Ground thanked its longest-serving staff member, social worker Kathy Mildon, for shining the light for so many until they could shine within themselves.



"If you look at the world as a friendly and hopeful place, as a web of relationships, you'll look for the good news in people and not the bad." That was one of the gems shared by Kathy Mildon at her retirement after 32 years on Higher Ground's community team.

Director Johnny Dow welcomed around 200 friends, family, colleagues and residents to celebrate Higher Ground's longest serving staff member. They included Kathy's husband Wayne and daughters Shannon from Zurich, and Robyn and her son Ben from Melbourne.

"As a 35-year-old social work student 35 years ago, I thought I knew everything," Kathy said. "But really when I reflect on what I do, it was not much different from what my grandmothers did a century ago. I remember my Irish and Scottish grandmothers as active listeners, non-judging, self-reflecting, people-focused, accepting.

"Lately I have been thinking about experience. It is not enough to be experienced unless you can turn that experience into graciousness. Somehow wisdom is not lodged inside until its truth has been engraved by some moment of delight, disappointment, joy.

"My grandmothers were able to turn their experience into graciousness. My Mum and Dad inherited many of their strengths. My Dad's instinct for people, my Mum's openness and compassion.

"My best wishes to the Higher Ground Board, my colleagues, but especially my love and best wishes to the former and current residents. That truly is where my growth has come from... sitting with you and your families, the ambulance at the bottom of the cliff, lending a helping hand, just like my grandmothers."

Kathy joined the staff in Higher Ground's first two years, and has seen it grow through all sorts of challenges from an eight-bed rented farmhouse in Manukau to the facility it is today.

Kathy has touched many thousand of lives, supporting clients and families with visits in prison and phone calls through pre-admission, treatment and often maintaining connection for years afterwards.

She has always preferred to keep a low public profile so the occasion, which coincided with her 70th birthday, was unusual. A testament to Kathy's impact was that ex-residents and ex-staff travelled from throughout Australasia to attend. Many ex-residents acknowledged 20 years-plus continuous abstinence from alcohol and other drugs, one from Gisborne 32 years drug-free.

Higher Ground founder and Board Chair Janet Colby worked closely with Kathy from when she started as part-time administrator in 1986. "I have so many fond memories of our time together. Our roles were multi-faceted; we shared lots of laughs and challenges.

"She could do the work of two people in half the time. It wouldn't be unusual to see me mixing a cake at the office desk while taking care of business on the phone, and Kathy rearranging the garden or helping an admission pack up her house so she could enter treatment."

Later, Higher Ground was able to purchase premises in Parnell, and extend bed numbers to 25. "We were up ladders painting out the smoke coloured rooms, and securing donations such as second hand carpet and furniture."

Higher Ground expanded again to Te Atatu Peninsula where Kathy became Community Team Leader managing admissions and juggling the huge waiting list.

Says Janet: "Those who have been assessed by Kathy often relay their amazement at how she gets to their heart no matter how many defenses they go in with. Her words and support gave them the courage and motivation to enter treatment for a better life.

"She just *gets* people and their needs – her skills, her vision, her passion, warmth and occasional rebellion are all endearing.

"Kathy, we have been blessed. Your dedication has never wavered and your ability to reach even the most difficult clients and motivate them to a turning point in their lives is unparalleled."

# 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 18 years and over, 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 telephoning 09-834 0042 for a pre-admission assessment appointment on weekdays between 8.30am and 4.00pm.

Assessments in 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.

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*It's Never Too Late continued from page 1*

don't have a bank account."

At Higher Ground lives change emotionally, spiritually, mentally and also practically. Clients get a chance to sort out on-going issues such as medical, legal or literacy.

They are introduced to recovery within 12-Step fellowships and graduate into a support house. "This opens doors to employment and meeting people. It really sets them up to re-integrate into the community in healthy ways."

They continue in Higher Ground's Continuing Care programme, which provides on-going support, counseling and groups and keeps the safety net in place.

"I like working with these clients because I came from that background myself. This has been my baby, I guess. I'm passionate about this contract. I've wanted it to do well because I think this is an area that needs more attention and needs more treatment.

"If we had more beds it would be fantastic because I've got 20-plus on the wait list for three beds. It is a juggle to get everyone in but I do think these people need a chance.

"It's a real transformation from where they have come from to who they are now – that's real success."

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*From Prison Back to Life continued from page 2*

declined and told to stop writing. So I wrote two letters a week. They finally came to see me and I got accepted into the programme four months later.

I relapsed even after being in the DTU. I knew that I needed more help and reached out to Higher Ground community team and was consistent with them until they came to see me.

Higher Ground gave me the opportunity to come in under the Department of Corrections contact straight from four years prison. You know what? Higher Ground was harder than jail!

I was definitely the anti-social. I was defiant, dishonest, it was hard for me to break out of my old behaviours of 'lie, deny, protect' that had served me so long.

My journey here was really rough, but I'm grateful for that. I think I got 12 warnings, two final warnings, a ban on contact with women, a mail ban, a 2500-word essay on dishonesty and attractions while in treatment.

It was about day 90 that I actually started to surrender and as soon as I did things started changing. Without getting all those warnings I would never have known what to change and what worked.

Dishonestly, manipulation, defiance, inappropriate humour – I discovered they were masks to protect myself, to stop me feeling my resentment towards my family and the hurt of my childhood.

I am now a year out of Higher Ground. I'm studying for a National Certificate in Mental Health and Addiction at university. I'm a certified peer support worker. I work at a private detox centre with pre-treatment clients.

My goal is to work with other addicts like myself on their journey.

I've got my son back in my life full-time. His mum is on the path of recovery, and we are best of friends. People say you get the life beyond your wildest dreams in recovery, and I'm living an amazing life I thought I'd never live clean and healthy.

I'm a committed member of Narcotics Anonymous where I've met an awesome support network within the meetings and within recovery.

I'm so grateful that Higher Ground brought our family together and made us talk about things we never wanted to talk about. From one-on-one counseling and family groups I understand the alcoholism growing up and the addiction. Our family today has never been stronger.

My biggest support people today are in fact my parents. They were there through my whole prison journey and through treatment. They are amazing grandparents to my son, and without them I would never have regained access or be in my son's life. They were there for him and me when I couldn't.

Higher Ground saved me and saved my family's life. That's why I come back and speak to other families coming into recovery. ”

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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, PO Box 45 192, Te Atatu Peninsula, Waitakere, 0610.

For further information about the Higher Ground rehabilitation programme phone Programme Director, Johnny Dow 09-834 0017 or fax 09-834 0018 email admin@higherground.org.nz www.higherground.org.nz