

**In our last issue, Natalie faced up to 10 years of drug-taking and turned to a local treatment agency to help her tackle her heroin addiction. The concluding part of her story is of immense courage and perseverance, support from strangers who became friends – and the unexpected revelation of new life around the corner**

“I decided to enter primary treatment and therefore give up all substances, including cannabis and alcohol. The agency’s rules also stated that I was not to go in any wet places, so I had to stop working in a pub. I knew I needed the agency if I was going to have any chance at beating my addiction. They had given me some structure. They had guided me because I did not know how to look after myself. I needed to be taught how to live again, to eat properly, be a proper mother. My son and I had been arguing like brother and sister, because I’d been like a child during my heroin using. I had forgotten the routine of meals and would binge eat from three or four o’clock in the afternoon. My counsellor helped me devise a balanced diet plan.

My determination to beat my addiction was spurred on by the stories that I had heard from ex-users and by what the agency had to offer. More than anything, I had longed for happiness and the feeling of belonging somewhere. I’d been totally unhappy when I was using heroin. For the first time, I felt I belonged somewhere. There was something about the agency. I just loved the people. They didn’t judge me. They treated me like a human being, supported me in whatever I wanted to do, and treated me as if I was a nice person. Most importantly, they believed in me.

I was really scared when I first started primary treatment. But there were a couple of people I knew from earlier meetings and that made it easier. Primary treatment required a strong commitment. You had to attend the agency one full day a week. You had to attend three NA/AA meetings and one counselling session a week. You had to do

written work. And there were rules to follow.

I still didn’t think I was going to overcome my addiction and complete treatment. ‘Yeah, you will’. I had all these people believing in me and wanting the best for me, which was something that was totally different to what I’d been used to. I began to notice little changes in myself. I sent back fifty pounds John (my ex-boyfriend) sent me for my birthday, even though I had no money. I did not want something from my old life. And I started gaining self respect. I started mixing with normal people, non-addicts. I began to do pottery and dress making courses in college, and I helped children learn to read at a local school.

I was so determined that I was going to complete treatment. I wanted to achieve something. There were times when I missed John, but I knew it was my head telling me that I miss drugs, because John *was* drugs as far as I was concerned. There were times that I was scared, like doing my life story in group sessions. I thought I needed a tranquilliser to get through it. I didn’t like those thoughts. Once you do it sober, you feel good. Very good.

I began to take responsibility for the role I had played in my addiction, instead of blaming John. My counsellor was fantastic. I had a lot of issues to deal with apart from my addiction. Everything was brought out in to the open, one way or another. I was desperate to move out of the family home because my father was still using heroin and he still associated with my old drug-taking friends. However, I couldn’t just move anywhere, because I had to think about my son and his schooling. An apartment finally



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became available in the right suburb, a week after I finished the nine-month primary treatment programme.

I then entered the aftercare programme. I finished the courses I had been doing at college – I had never completed a course before – and also began doing voluntary work at the agency. Six months later, the agency offered me a full-time job as a receptionist. I could not believe it! I gradually built a new social network and rebuilt my relationship with my family. Most importantly, I gradually rebuilt the relationship with my son. For a long time, he would not trust me, would not cuddle or kiss me. It took a long time, but now we are so close.

I’ve been off heroin and all other drugs for over four years. I shock myself when I think of the state I was in. I was 24 with no future other than my addiction and I truly believed I would never achieve anything.

As a child, my dream of what it was like to be an adult was nothing like how I was living and that was very sad. But now I am so happy and that dream of adulthood is far better than I ever imagined. I feel free and very fortunate. And I have choices. Most people who come here are really shocked when they find out I’m a recovering heroin addict.

I owe the agency my life. But I also know that I accomplished a lot – I played an important role in my recovery. I’m no different from anyone else, so anyone can do it. If a person wants to do it, they can do it. Nothing is too immense to sort out, but you need to reach out and get the help. You don’t have to do it on your own. There are people who will help you.