

Former addict credits program for incredible turnaround

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Life is good for Jeremie Vautour, right, since graduating from the Portage Atlantic centre, which treats young people dependent on drugs and alcohol. After a dark period in his life, Vautour is sober, has a job he loves, a girlfriend and his greatest supporter Breanna Richard, left, and his own home. Vautour is telling his story of falling and getting back to highlight Portage's 20th anniversary, during which they have rehabilitated almost 2,000 young people.

It's not hard to rationalize ripping off your family and friends for money for drugs and booze when you're an addict, says recovering substance abuser Jeremie Vautour.

"You just say to yourself, 'I'll worry about it later,'" the Moncton man says.

Vautour, 27, was once at rock bottom, chronically depressed, binging on cocaine and liquor and tormented by suicidal thoughts.

Now he's been clean for two years. He has worked his way into a great job and gets regular promotions. He has a nice car and owns a house, which he and his life partner are renovating. People love and respect him. Those who didn't know him during the dark times think he's joking when he tells them of the hell he put himself, his family and his friends through.

At age 18, the gentle downward slope of his life of occasional drug and regular alcohol use turned into an out-of-control roller-coaster ride.

"I stole from my ex-girlfriend. My parents were about to kick me out. I didn't know what sobriety was," he recalls.

A 10-month stint at Portage Atlantic helped him straighten out his life. Portage is a residential drug addiction treatment program for young people at Cassidy Lake, west of Sussex, where they use positive role modelling and peer pressure to help young addicts get back on track. He stayed sober for two years before that first drink following rehab, on his birthday. Just one drink.

Fast forward to age 24 when he had racked up \$30,000 in credit card bills to pay for his addiction. He's still paying off those bills today. He'd party all weekend, go to work on Monday morning with his head in a fog, and hate himself for it during every minute of the entire work week, his thoughts dominated by where and when he could get his next buzz.

Laying in a hospital bed after a bad binge, forcing himself to be accountable for his own actions, he turned to Portage again, even though the facility caters to those age 14 to 21. He was three years older than the limit, but they let him in anyway. This time, he did it for him.

"It was an incredible experience," he says. "They didn't give up on me. They never give up on anyone. For the first time, I was able to identify what I was feeling, what those feelings were and how to accept myself."

A second breakthrough followed when he saw a psychiatrist.

"I'm finally at peace," he says. "It literally saved me. Now I finally know what it is, not to be depressed. It was a real lifesaver. Now I finally have a choice where I can choose to be happy or not. It's all I ever wanted in life."

Vautour's story is common at Portage, says director Carol Tracey. The centre has hosted nearly 2,000 youths since it opened 20 years ago. The non-profit organization, founded in 1995, also has centres in Ontario and Quebec.

While there's limited information on how many residents of the facility have gone on to live successful lives, as staff often lose touch with residents, between 40 and 50 young people graduate each year.

"They work so hard to take back control of their lives," says Tracey. "Sometimes I think I'm having troubles, and then I listen to their determination. The strength of these kids, well, just wow," she says.

Vautour says he is telling his story to show others who are following on the path to self-destruction that help is available. Portage is grateful for testimonials like his, Tracey says.

"You can do it," she says, "especially with youth like Jeremie who put their stories out there and show that there is a way."

With his newfound peace comes the realization that a lapse is always just one misstep away, Vautour and girlfriend Breanna Richard agree.

"Things can happen," Richard says. "I tell him I'll be there for him, no matter what."

Several times in an interview Vautour mentions how it isn't the material things that are now in his life which are symbolic of his accomplishment. It's his feeling of peace, an elusive goal that sends many others down a wrong path in life.

"It's not just with addictions, but for any hard time you are having," he says. "Step back. Put away your computer. Put away your phone and your TV. Go talk to someone. Just concentrate on your breathing for a few minutes. Write stuff down. The more you go at it, eventually it will all become clear."

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