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Drugs drove woman to the very edge of the precipice

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Kelsey Ford, 24, of Cornwall says her life feels "calm and manageable" after completing drug addiction rehabilitation at Portage Atlantic in New Brunswick. She is now studying at UPEI, working towards becoming a social worker.

From ecstasy and marijuana to Percocets and Dilaudids, a recovering drug addict turns her life around

Growing up in Ebenezer, the only child always yearned to one day have a good career, nurture a loving family, and a live in a house she could call her own. Early on, she did her best to sideline those ambitions.

“I guess really it all kind of started when I was 10, going on 11,” says the 24-year-old Cornwall resident.

That was when Ford’s parents broke up, and she moved to Charlottetown with her mother. The change from rural to city life, not to mention the dramatic shift to a broken family, hit hard. She became rebellious.

“I wanted,” she notes in hindsight, “to push down feelings I didn’t know I had.”

Ford thrived on seeking adrenaline rushes.

As a young girl new to the city, she would sneak away from her home and stay out late at night, hanging out with older youth.

She started drinking alcohol – straight rum was her first poison – at age 11.

She drank every weekend “to the point where I couldn’t walk.”

Her mother constantly called the police to track Ford down and haul her home.

“God love my mother,” says Ford.

“I can’t believe I did that to her.”

At 13, she started dabbling in drugs, first with ecstasy, a drug that can cause hallucinations.

Drugs, she recalls, gave her greater escape from life than did booze. So she stuck with drugs.

When she hit 15, she used strictly marijuana. She would regularly get stoned out of her mind.

She performed poorly in school. She dropped out at age 17.

Turning her back on high school came at a time when she was starting to get into opiates and abusive relationships.

Drug use escalated by age 18. Percocets and Dilaudids were heavily abused.

Ford also went from one relationship to another, each usually lasting about one year, each with an older man, each quite a negative experience.

She somehow managed to hold on to work – most of the time – cleaning motels.

She went into detoxification three times in P.E.I., but returned to drugs a couple weeks after each cleansing of drugs from her system.

For a stubborn period of time, Ford was convinced she could eventually kick drugs on her own.

“I wanted...“to push down feelings I didn’t know I had.” Kelsey Ford

Finally, after two years of urging by a counsellor, she agreed to go to Portage Atlantic, a residential drug addiction rehabilitation centre for youth living in Atlantic Canada.

“If I didn’t do something differently, I would end up losing my life,” she says.

Ford spent seven months in the therapeutic community environment, working through the underlying issues that caused her substance abuse.

She also developed a set of social competencies to help deal with the challenges of everyday life without resorting to drugs.

She is being heralded as a success story in progress as the Portage Atlantic celebrates its 20th year that has seen 2,000 youth attend the rehab facility in New Brunswick.

“I was very nervous going over,” she says.

“But when I got there, everything just kind of fell into place. There was always structure.”

While at Portage Atlantic, she learned who she was as a person.

She gained a “real relationship” with her mother.

And she even found the time – and energy – to complete her high school diploma.

She credits the intense program with preparing her to pursue her dreams.

“I wouldn’t be who I am today without that,” she says.

“I needed that structure.”

Ford has been clean for three years.

She has been in a healthy relationship for two years with the father of her one-year-old son, Carter.

She continues to clean motels full-time but has also been taking sociology courses at UPEI over the past two years.

Her goal is to become a social worker and help others the way her social worker helped her.

Life still has its share of daily stresses for Ford, but she feels equipped to tackle them in a positive fashion.

“It feels calm and manageable, not chaotic,” she says.

“Just really fulfilling.”

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