

Portage Atlantic mark 20 years of healing drug-addicted youth



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Danielle McArthur was one of 20 to graduate from Portage Atlantic Sunday during the 2016 recognition ceremony and 20th anniversary celebration.

Photo: Laura MacInnis / Kings County Record

CASSIDY LAKE • On Sunday Portage Atlantic celebrated 20 years of helping more than 2,000 drug addicted youth on the shores of Cassidy Lake near Norton.

With 350 in attendance, special guests included graduates from the last 20 years, political and community leaders who helped get the project off the ground, the vital staff who aim to bring out the best in the struggling youth, and the many friends and family members of this year's 20 graduates.

One of those graduates, Danielle McArthur said, without hesitation, Portage Atlantic has given her back her life.

Just like the thousands of youth who have entered the facility over the past two decades, the 21 year-old Moncton woman was struggling with drug addiction, in pain and skeptical if anyone could help her when she arrived 11 months ago,

"This place saved my life," she said. "I was living in a homeless shelter. I lost my family I couldn't hold a

job and I lost my apartment,” she said.

It was a friend who had already been through the program at Portage that suggested she give it a shot.

During her eight month stay her new community gave her the tools she needed to help herself. With staff guidance she now has a job and a vision for the future.

“They really challenged me and it was so hard,” she said reflecting on her stay. “But they helped me make goals and figure out how to accomplish my dreams.”

One of those goals is to help people with addiction issues, just as she was helped. She said she plans to go back to school to become a clinical counsellor.

On stage during the graduation ceremony from the program she thanked not only the staff but the members of the local community who supported her and the fellow grads as they attempted to pick themselves up.

“The ladies of Taste and See would regularly invite the people at Portage for a meal. They were just great to talk to,” she said of the local Sussex restaurant. “I will be forever grateful to them.”

Among those in attendance at the graduation ceremony was Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick Jocelyne Roy-Vienneau, who opened the event, acknowledging the dedication of the group who completed the program.

“Second chances are an opportunity to set things right,” she said. “...There is a wonderful sense of enthusiasm here today and it is great to be a part of it.”

Also attending were Fundy Royal MP Alaina Lockhart, Sussex-Fundy-St. Martins MLA Bruce Northrup, former Fredericton Mayor Brad Woodside, and former Nova Scotia Premier Darrell Dexter.

Portage president Peter Howlett said it is because of the community support the centre receives at all levels, that it continues to succeed in its aim to help errant youth- everyone from the Fredericton Canadiens hockey team that held fundraising games to get the project off the ground, to the politicians, mayors, policemen and nurses who backed the project and the Kings County businesses and organizations that, today, give Portage residents opportunities for volunteering in the community.

The seeds of Portage Atlantic began in the 1980s when the Nashwaaksis Lions Club members implemented the “Try hugs not drugs” campaign.

In 1993 the Lions and greater business community approached the government seeking help for a residential rehabilitation program. In 1995 the United Church of Canada was identified as a suitable property with the first contract being signed by the provincial government a year later and Cassidy Lake welcoming its residents.

Back then it looked a lot different. Residence consisted of non-winterized wooden cabins. In 2010, following extensive fundraising Portage Atlantic opened the new facility as it sits today.

“Today, we are celebrating Portage Atlantic’s 20th anniversary, but most importantly, were celebrating the youth who come through these doors with the goal of turning their lives around,” said chairman Dr. Russell H.T. King.

Each graduate was given the opportunity to speak, many thanking the families who stood beside them or convinced them to go to rehab, others thanking the case workers who guided them and one thanking his new fiancée who he had just proposed to before the ceremony started.

Keynote speaker Josh Milburn spoke to the graduates as a person who has taken what he learned at Portage 18 years ago to lead a successful, and happy life drug-free.

“Portage Atlantic has changed my life and has allowed me to attain the serenity and happiness I have today,” Milburn said.

Back in 1997, Milburn said he was addicted to hard drugs and had sunk so low he tried to kill himself. He called his mom to help him and found himself in the hospital on his 19th birthday before deciding to give Portage a chance.

Though the buildings on the grounds are a far cry from the “small blue box” he once attended, he said the beautiful view has stayed the same.

“It is amazing to be back here,” he said looking out over the picturesque lake. “But I’m sure a lot of people who leave here feel the same way that I do. It will always be a home away from home.”

He said that nature was and continues to be a huge part in his sobriety.

“I have found my happy place in the woods,” said the father of two teens who has third baby on the way this year. “I do a lot of canoeing and hiking. I would be the first one up in the morning and I’d sneak out and sit and look at the water and work through my thoughts.”

He told the recent grads he understands the struggle they face as they leave the rehab centre and attempt to get back to regular life and told them to be strong.

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