

STORIES

12 My Journey from Nova Scotia to Ottawa

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I would like to share my story, my shortcomings and strengths, my experience on the streets and what I think can be done to make change.

You just never know when or where you might be able to make a difference in someone's life.

My journey from Nova Scotia to Ottawa was not without incident. After 18 months on the reserve, drinking a 26 oz. a day and a 40 oz. on Fridays and Saturdays, there was no way to stop drinking without a series of consequences.

So before jumping on the bus, I stopped at the liquor store for a quart of beer and a 26 oz. of whiskey. On the way out of town on the highway, where my kids lived, I said good-bye as I looked out the window. I took a deep breath and a big swig of my whiskey. I was all choked up and sad to leave them behind, but I knew they would be coming soon—their mother's boyfriend was in the military and was being transferred to Ottawa.

Let the first leg of my journey begin

I told my kids I was going to Ottawa to get a place and would see them there. I was looking forward to a time when I would have overnight visits with my kids again; this was my lifeline to staying focused and on track. This is what prevented me from staying on the streets forever.

Well, it didn't take me long to become stranded in the next province, Fredericton, New Brunswick. What I thought was going to be a quick refuel, turned out to be the end of the road for me on that bus. The bus driver checked the plastic cup I had my booze in, sensed I was under the influence and asked me to get off the bus.

I was stranded. It was cold and wet, so sleeping outside was not an option. I only had \$40. A motel room was out of the question, so off to the police station I went. When I arrived I had to ring a buzzer, and after signing a release form, they gave me a blanket, a pillow and a cell for the night. I slept like a baby.

The next morning when I woke up, they told me the next bus doesn't leave until 7pm and that there's a men shelter a couple of streets over. I went for breakfast and hung out with the boys. I still had my big beer left so I shared it with them. It wasn't long before we made our way to the liquor store.

The role of homeless supports in my life

I think, for the most part, the major contributor to my ending up on the streets was the lack of addiction treatment programs available. Any long-term treatment has a six- to eight-month minimum wait time. Shelters become an easy option with free meals and a roof over your head; and you're close to downtown, which leaves no need for a bus pass for transportation.

Unlike ODSP (Ontario Disability Support Program), people on social assistance have to pay full price for their bus pass. This comes out of a \$365 shelter allowance, which leaves them with \$220 for the month. In many cases, the money allocated for your bus pass is spent on housing or daily living. This leaves people helpless to get around to food banks.

Living in the shelters pays you a PNA (Personal Needs Allowance), and in many cases that is more than you would end up with if you had your own place. Someone who has their own place would have a bunch of bills to pay, along with paying full price for their bus pass. They have little money left for food, clothing, hygiene items, etc. In having your own place, you can't afford a phone, cable TV, laundry, clothing, etc.

With our current two-tier medical system for those who can pay and those who can't, people on assistance do not have the coverage to pay for medications they may need. This forces people to get creative in order to get the things they need.

There are just so many ways to make money. When a good scam comes out, people 'jump on the bandwagon,' as they say. If someone is making good money selling their medication, it's not long before the word gets out on how and what to say to the doctors to get what you need.

Others that need medication and can't get it from their doctor, or who are not covered, turn to the streets. Often, street drugs are not regulated and are dangerous. These drugs can be very addictive, and it's a slippery slope into homelessness.

No matter what kind of scam you're into, it is likely illegal, and eventually you will get caught. Having a criminal record, like bad credit, does nothing but further put people at a loss, and makes getting a good job or an apartment almost hopeless.

Working under the table becomes a good option for those affected by past wrong doings. You get the security of having your rent covered by welfare or disability benefits, and are able to supplement your income in a more socially acceptable way. This is why handyman services are so popular.

Many people become frustrated with the system, and the only escape from the torment of reality and the stigma that we live in when we are down and out is drugs (including alcohol and prescriptions).

It's likely that you'll become socially depressed. We are sad due to the way we see the world around us. It is circumstances that bring us to an emotional depression. We don't see the help that's around us, and we

dwell on what we think we are powerless over.

The second leg of my journey: Still stranded in Fredericton

At the liquor store, my regular routine was to buy a big beer and steal a mickey. It was easy for me, being a new face in the town of Fredericton. By the time 7pm rolled around, I was too drunk to get on the bus heading to Ottawa.

Partying is all part of that life, and I showed those boys how to have a good time. The only problem was we were all too drunk to get back into the shelter, so six or seven of us went to the police station. This time we were all charged with public intoxication, and we were put in the drunk tank with no blanket or pillow.

The next morning at the liquor store, it was evident that police already alerted them because all eyes were on me. I knew it was time to leave town, so I drank just enough of my 26 oz. of whiskey so I wasn't sick, and off to the bus stop I headed. The boys didn't want me to go, but Ottawa was my destination.

Finally I got on the bus without incident. I held my breath as I showed my ticket to the bus driver. I arrived in Ottawa with two big duffel bags, my knapsack, \$7 in my pocket, a half bottle of whiskey and a big beer. In a short time, I polished off the bottle of whiskey. With nowhere to go again, it was off to the police station.

The police phoned ahead and secured me a bed at the local men's shelter. There I met a whole bunch of new friends. I knew I had time to find a place before my kids moved to Ottawa, so I hung out with the boys. What I thought was going to be a short time ended up being almost four months on the streets.

For many, living on the streets or in the shelters is the end of the road; when things seem hopeless, it's all the roadblocks that you run into that make you give up the fight and settle for survival. Survival becomes a way of life, a freedom, a comfort, where you have friends. Having your own

place often leads to confinement, depression and loneliness. I envision a community-living environment where everyone works together doing laundry, cooking and cleaning. It becomes a big family; a group of people who share common interests, and can set some goals for independent living. It's a place where you have friends, where before you had none. We all need a home, not just housing.

But many just give up. It becomes too hard to fight the system, so you just live within in it: can't get it, steal it, and get caught, good! Put me in jail—free meal, free drugs, a doctor, clean clothes, etc. It becomes a revolving door.

The end to my life on the streets

It was time to sober up; my kids would be coming soon, so off to detox I went. After spending seven days in detox, I went back to the shelter where I met up with one of my buddies who managed to get a place in a rooming house. I spent a couple of nights and decided this could become my way off the streets.

Soon after, I got my own room and took the position of superintendent. Becoming a superintendent supplemented my income by \$150, just enough to get me through the month.

It wasn't long before my heavy drinking and tough guy image was challenged one too many times. I ended up with assault charges and was sent back to jail for three months. Coming out of jail with a determination to turn my life around, I got another room and a superintendent position in a quiet building. I also got on the wait list for subsidized housing. To get on an urgent list, I pretended I was still homeless and put my son on the list with me to get housing quicker.

It took three months, and even once they found out my son didn't qualify, they still had a bachelor apartment for me. Things were looking up. I managed to get a new I.D through a community centre where I was seeing a doctor and applied for ODSP

When I moved into my new bachelor apartment, I was still addicted to alcohol. I thought I could help other street people. I would invite them into

my house to shower and do their drugs, but this soon turned into a new business opportunity for me.

I was able to get off the booze but became a full-blown crack addict. Selling crack became a way of supporting my habit as well as supplementing my income. It took about six months of dealing crack to 30 or 40 people a day to catch the eyes of the law, and I was off to jail again, losing everything.

You could say I had been left in the cold. My discharge worker never did confirm housing before my release from jail. A visit to the ODSP office left me no hope of receiving any money for shelter, food or clothing. I was released 36 pounds heavier after 107 days of confinement. I had no clothes that fit.

If not for a friend, I would be forced back to the streets. Like most people coming out of jail, I would have had to resort back to shelters, where the game never changes and you are always at ‘rock bottom’. Being forced into survival mode has its setbacks—for me, it pushed the limits on my ability to remain sober.

I was not able to secure any financial support until 12 days after my release. All the old feelings and the high of being free came back to haunt me. When you’re left with nothing, many are forced back into the same old routine they were in before they got arrested. Unfortunately, most of the time, you’re sucked right back in the game. It’s quick, it’s an easy fix, and for some, this is the only life they know.

What I think could have made a difference

My frustration and disappointment in the system were setting in. I feel people just give up the fight. Help is scattered all over the place, with too many barriers, too many hurdles and too much red tape. Today, again forced to work within the system, I am left frustrated. I had a fire back in May 2012, and struggled to find a new place to call home.

I would like to see a facility that would have people come in one door and have everything they need under one roof—like one-stop shopping. To the left we have doctors, dentists, psychiatrists and mental health care; on the

right we have addiction counsellors, personal care workers for housing, etc. So at the end, when you walk out the last door, you're ready for a new start.

Shelters, community centres, etc., are also a lifeline, and in my opinion could be the perfect place to try this out. Funding needs to be allocated for services and facilities in order to accommodate long-term treatment programs, rather than a long-term waiting list for these services. When someone hits that 'rock bottom,' or finally realizes they need help, we need to have the help for them, then and there. For most it's their last chance: if they don't get help, they may never come out of it.

My addictions came at a heavy cost to all those around me. But today, I can share the love that was lost for so many years. All the programs I took on addictions in the past, and writing a transcript of my book, *Life in the Game of Addiction* while in jail, helped turn my life around. If not for this, my time would have been wasted, and the cycle would have continued.

My hope is that people live without addictions in their life, and that others realize that people do change. Don't judge a homeless person, because you don't know what led them to homelessness.

I lowered myself to the streets where I had lost everything, but learned so much. I learned that the world is not all about the riches of the flesh, but the love for life and helping the needs of one another. Living on the streets in total surrender of life's challenges has led me to the life I live today, and to my belief system.

Life in mainstream society revolves around seeing personal wealth as success. I was a very successful general contractor for years, and then succumbed to the greed of wanting the bigger, the better and the more the merrier. My goal was to become a millionaire. But now, after all my experiences, I see wealth in love of family, friends and faith in God. I am truly blessed with 'happy thoughts' today.

Many times when I was on the streets, I looked at all the people going by, and thought, "You poor bastards. You're like a bunch of robots programmed to do the same thing day in, day out, stuck in debt to greed of the materialistic world."

Although I had many great times on the streets, the reality is if you miss a meal, you go hungry; if your shoes are wet and worn, you suffer. The threat of violence is all around. The loss of my family is ultimately what led me to get off the streets. It was the pain—the hurt inside—that could have kept me on the streets and using until the end, like many before me who have lost their lives, or have taken their own lives. Giving up, thinking this is the end of the road, nobody cares anyway.

I am by no means perfect, and still have minor flirtations with past addictions, but today I am no longer trapped by any outside influences in my everyday life. Sometimes in life it takes the loss of everything to really appreciate what you have.

God bless everyone for He has blessed me.



Richard Henry

Today I have regained my love for life and each day is filled with love and joy of the next to come. Just when I think I have found all the answers something new comes up. What I have learned this far in life is that I still have a lot to learn. I believe it`s not so much what I can get out of this world but what I can give in the way of helping others and making this a better world for our future generations. Today, I am a self proclaimed Addiction Specialist, with 30 years experience dwelling and recovering from my own addictions. Before becoming a certified Smart Recovery Facilitator, I was a peer worker at a community health centre.

I just recently self published my Memoir called “Life in the game of Addictions”. Most importantly, my kids are back in my life and I get to enjoy time spent with my 3 grandkids.