



We Need Programs That Get Junkies Off Drugs, Not Keep Them Addicted

by David Berner

This article originally appeared in The Province on December 21st, 2007.

Vancouver residents Susie and Robert Ruttan have been wrestling with the issues of addictions for a decade now.

They had to.

In a few short years, their teenage son went from pot to heroin to speedballs. At his lowest, the boy cried out in despair, “Give up on me, Dad!”

Giving up isn’t in the Ruttan dictionary. After discovering that there is nowhere for teen addicts to go for help in B.C., they flew their son to the Portage residential drug treatment centre in Quebec in 1999. Portage works on the therapeutic community model like Daytop, Phoenix, and Italy’s San Patrignano, the largest drug rehab community in the world. These are places that work, places with proven track records of recovery.

When The Province did a story back in 2000 about the Ruttan’s new group, “From Grief to Action,” Susie fielded over 100 phone calls, many of them long and tearful. Their next meeting drew over 200 people at St. Mary’s Church in Kerrisdale. Suddenly it was clear that addictions were not strictly a DTES problem. Every postal code and every level of income is at risk. No family is immune.

“We realized that the voices of From Grief to Action could have an impact. We could put the Human Face on the story.”

The Central City Foundation, which has been helping disadvantaged people in Vancouver for over 100 years now, heard Susie Ruttan on CBC radio 7 years ago. They knew that they had to get involved.

Central City bought “The Crossing,” a 58 acre Outward Bound site near Keremeos and chose the Portage program, in business in Quebec and New Brunswick since 1973, to be the service provider.

From Grief to Action, joining forces with Central City, continued to lobby for help. “We had to sell the Health authorities, the Ministries of Education, Health and Children and Families.

Premier Gordon Campbell appeared supportive, but Cabinet members came and went, and in 2005, one Minister declared, “Residential treatment seems no longer the way to go.”

Feeling all was lost, Susie made the speech of her life. She spoke of the prohibitive costs to families and friends and neighbourhoods of not providing treatment for addicted youth.

On September 6th, Health Minister George Abbott, announced that the province will contribute \$2.4 million annually to operate the new Portage program at Keremeos. Forty-two young people, age 14-24, will stay in the program from 6 months to a year. At less than \$60,000 per child, this is cheap.

The Ruttan’s son has been clean and sober and working and studying for some time now.

“This is the kind of thing that can tear families apart. But when we come together at Christmas this year, it will be a happy reunion. We’ve worked together as a team, and the effect on all of us has been profound.”

Amidst the wasteland of bad ideas about youth and addictions, this is one of the few glimmering lights of Hope.

Most “experts” are selling methadone (six times more addictive than heroin), free heroin, replacement pharmaceuticals, free crack pipes and needles, and places to get your morning fix in comfort (only to return to your customary craziness in the alley by mid-afternoon.)

Here, instead, is a thorough and knowledgeable program that attends to the entire person, body and soul, and so often achieves the return of dignity.