

## Finding strength in times of adversity: J's story

When J's best friend and girlfriend committed suicide at the age of 21, he wanted to get a fresh start away from the violence and alcohol abuse he was experiencing in Pukatawagan. He decided to move to Winnipeg, and for a while things were looking up.

"I owned a house, cars, and I had a new girlfriend," he said.

Despite being in a new place, J's alcohol addiction continued to plague him, and within five years he lost everything he came to Winnipeg to get. After losing his job, he resorted to stealing bicycles for cash and estimates that he averaged about 20 bikes per year. Now J relies on panhandling for money.

"I was once beaten up by a 'regular-looking guy' while panhandling," J said. "He looked to be employed and moneyed, so I asked for some change. The man punched me in the face without a word."

Violence is nothing new in J's life though. When he was 13, his father became violent toward him, and in order to avoid him, J began couch-surfing with friends and family. He said that was when he fell in with the wrong crowd.

"I began to use alcohol and marijuana, and I stole things," he said. "Other kids convinced me to try it, and I wanted to fit in."

Not only has J had to deal with his own addiction to alcohol, he's also seen friends die of alcohol and solvent abuse. He remembers seeing a friend who was inhaling solvents fall in front of a passing car. That friend is now confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life.

J said there are still some good things in his life though. An occupant in the apartment building near one of J's regular places to sleep will bring him a coffee and sometimes a doughnut every morning.

"Most people are generous when I'm panhandling," he said. "It is important to ask nice and use manners. When I feel threatened, the Downtown Watch will watch out for me."

J wants people to understand that people in his situation are willing to contribute what they can. They help each other out and will help you out too. This sentiment is reflected in the way CHAT goes about helping people. CHAT provides a preventative outreach approach that addresses the barriers and complexes faced by the homeless population with the goal of providing help on an individualized basis.

"We can be good or bad, mean or nice, and you cannot assume someone is good or bad by whether or not they have a home," he said. "We don't think you're all good or bad, and we aren't either."

If he could give advice to his younger self, it would be to stay in school and remember that anything is possible, good or bad.



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## 'A homeless person is a normal person': Jamie's story

Jamie, 51, spends a lot of time in downtown Winnipeg trying to sell art cards and paintings and asking for donations. Jamie has been homeless since 2014. He said the biggest issue he sees on the streets is mental health.

"Many of these people are not lazy," he said, "They just suffer from mental health issues."

Jamie knows firsthand what it's like to deal with a mental health issue. After his father's death, he said he felt traumatized, and it really affected his mental health. He didn't have proper family and support to help him through it, and he developed a personality disorder.

Since becoming homeless, Jamie has been working and volunteering four hours per week at Upbeat Art Works – an extension of Artbeat Studio, which is funded by the Downtown Winnipeg BIZ's CEO Sleepout. Artbeat Studio reaches out to artists who live with mental illness and provides access to studio space, tools, materials, and services.

"With the right help, I would like to be living in a comfortable place of my own so that I can excel at my painting," he said. "I want to be able to sell my work so I can be self-sufficient and a productive member of society."

For Jamie, making art helps him handle his mental health issues. He said he would like to see more programs created that recognize the skills of people with mental health issues so that those people can use their skills to the benefit of society and the community. He said he thinks homelessness could affect anyone.

"It could be your mother, father, son, daughter, or grandma," he said, "A homeless person is a normal person, a member of society, who, due to unfortunate circumstances or mental health issues, ended up not having a home."

Jamie said he would have liked to take up art earlier in life so he could work on his art in his home and have support from his family and friends. If he could go back and give his teenage-self advice, it would be to see a counsellor to help him with his mental health issues.

"It's okay to ask for help," he said. "You don't deserve to, and don't need to, feel this bad."

Overall, Jamie has found Winnipeg to be a generous city. He notices that people volunteer and donate, and some people are regular customers who care about his well-being.

"I can't thank people enough for their charity," he said, "But charity doesn't fix everything."

Jamie has been working with CHAT since summer 2015. He said his experience has been positive, as they have been able to connect him to services that meet his needs. In the future, he'd like to see more CHAT staff hired so they can continue to help everyone on the streets.



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## A place to call her own: Margaret's story

After living on the streets for a number of years, Margaret is finding comfort in having a place to call her own. It's a welcome change from the violence and drinking problems that came along with her homelessness.

"I choose to stay away from all that," she said. "I know people still living on the streets and I say hi to them, but I don't go around the circle drinking with them. I have to look after me because my health has really gone down from all the drinking I've done over the years."

Margaret started drinking at the young age of 14. She had left her home and was living with a foster family. Life with her foster family was good until the couple decided to foster another older girl.

"My foster parents said I needed to have someone in the home with me because they saw the loneliness in me, and I was screaming a lot in my dreams," she said. "They were making arrangements to get another child, but they chose a girl who was street-wise."

Margaret said her foster sister encouraged her to steal from their foster parents and to run away to the city. A Children's Aid worker tracked them down, and Margaret's foster mother asked her to return home. Margaret decided to go home to her real mother instead.

"My older sister took on the father-figure role in the family, and she disciplined us in a harsh way," Margaret said. "Life at home never changed – a lot of drinking and violence. It was just a tough time."

Margaret had a good home with her husband and children until 2009. She said the hardest part about living on the street for her was that she didn't know how to protect herself because she's a trusting person by nature.

"I'd stay in shelters at night and go to the skywalks and bus shacks to stay warm during the day," she said. "We were always hoping to bump into someone to get our next drink."

Margaret found out about CHAT in 2014. At the time, she was living in an unclean environment and wanted to get out of there. She began to get to know the people at CHAT, and once she started connecting with them, she started getting help for clothes and other things. With help from CHAT, Margaret was able to move from the streets to a rooming house to her own apartment.

"I like it here, and I spend all my time here," she said. "I keep my home private to myself and don't give out information about where I am."

Margaret's family is still living on the streets and drinking heavily. As much as she'd like them to come visit her, she said their drinking has got to stop first.



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## Don't judge a book by its cover: Ted's story

Ted knows firsthand the struggles that come with living on the street. He said the appearance of being homeless creates low self-esteem and prevents people from going to their family for help. It's what drove Ted to start sleeping in shelters.

"In 2004, I started moving from place to place staying with family," he said. "My drinking got so bad, and I didn't want to bother my family with it, so I started sleeping in shelters in 2006."

The shelters were not a solution for his drinking, however. He said he's seen a lot of drinking and solvent abuse. For Ted, this is one of the biggest misconceptions people have about homeless people. Other people only see how homeless people act when they're drunk, not sober."

"Homeless people are not really what they look like," he said. "They look rough but are really nice people. These people are hurting inside and do things to cope with the pain."

Ted said homeless people are doing the best they can. He said he thinks part of the problem is that a lot of people come from the rez to the city and end up doing things based on what they have seen growing up. However, Ted said he has also seen some good things living on the streets.

"It's hard not knowing where you're going to sleep or what you're going to do," he said, "But homeless people look out for each other and help each other out."

Ted has been with CHAT since 2013. He said it's thanks to them that he has been able to get his life on track again.

"Without this program I would not have had the support to quit drinking and find a place."

Ted is now at a point in his life where he doesn't need as much help from CHAT anymore. He's still friendly with the CHAT team though and will stop by and say 'hi' from time to time. Ted doesn't like to look back on what he might have done differently in his life.

"I can't think about my past," he said. "I have been doing good thanks to the help from CHAT, and I choose not to drink anymore."

Ted said he tries to show people what he's done and said he hopes it helps others do the same. He said if he could go back in time, he would have listened to the advice from people who were trying to help him.



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## From the street to a stable apartment: Roberta's story

For Roberta, becoming homeless was a choice. Growing up, she tried to live with both her mom and her dad but decided she didn't like following their rules. At the age of 12, she began to spend time with hookers on Main Street.

"I used to watch over them," she said. "They would give me money to buy food and clothes. I just thought that life was okay because I got to do what I wanted and didn't have to follow anyone's rules."

She said she felt safer in that situation than she did growing up at home. Before her mom decided to turn her life around, she ran with a lot of guys who threw wicked parties with a lot of violence.

Roberta said one of the ways she used to make money was by jumping people. She ended up in the Youth Center a few times. She said when the cops dropped her off for the first time she was smiling.

"It was really exciting for me because all of my family members have been in jail at one point or another," she said. "The cops said 'Welcome to your new home' and asked me why I was smiling. They said 'Don't you know you're about to be locked up?' But I was just excited."

After going to the Youth Center a few times, Roberta said she decided to go back to school to avoid being put in a group home. One of her teachers got her to start writing a journal and without even realizing it, Roberta started writing poems.

"I didn't even know what a poem was," she said. "My teacher started entering me in writing contests, and I got a couple of poems published."

Roberta continued on with her schooling, finishing high school and starting out in an engineering program. But during her first year in the program, Roberta's younger brother was murdered. Tragedy continued in Roberta's family, and only two of her nine other siblings are still alive.

"I didn't know how to deal with death," she said. "Me and my little brother were really close. That's when I started drinking heavily."

Roberta said she thinks it's almost impossible to be sober when you're homeless because it's a way to deal with being scared and paranoid. Roberta decided to get sober after getting so sick she almost died.

"I went to the hospital and to detox and meetings and eventually got treatment," she said.

CHAT helped Roberta transition from homelessness to having a stable apartment. Roberta said all she needs now is some furniture.



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