

TO HELL AND BACK

A heartbreaking journey

While Chris declined anonymity for this story, his family situation prompted us to protect his identity.

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

As a child, Chris says he was routinely abused by his father, at times chained by his ankle to the box spring he slept on without comfort of a mattress.

He doesn't know how much his early years contributed to his mental illness, which was diagnosed last year as paranoid schizophrenia and attention deficit disorder with hyperactivity.

But he does know he's been to hell and back.

Chris' story of homelessness, hopelessness and substance abuse is a common one for people suffering from severe mental illness, according to Julie Mark and Mike Hickie, the managers of Newmarket's Heritage Lodge, where Chris is a resident.

Pointing to York Region's growing homeless problem, they said a disproportionate percentage are people coping with mental illnesses including schizophrenia, depression or bipolar disorders.

Far more common than the threat of violence is the fear schizophrenics will attempt suicide.

A study of York's homeless during a three-month period three years ago found 496 people without a permanent place to live.

Almost 80 per cent of the 165 people officials could get information on appeared to be suffering

from mental illness and/or substance abuse.

Heritage Lodge, a privately owned group home funded by the provincial and regional governments, is currently home to 20 mentally ill adults, although the facility is licensed for 22 residents.

"Some have delusions of grandeur where they think they own countries," said Mark, who believes a positive attitude and a sense of humour go hand-in-hand with caring for the mentally ill.

Mark and Hickie know society views the mentally ill, especially schizophrenics, with suspicion.

But they stress in most cases, the concern is unwarranted if patients are receiving proper medical care.

"The owner of this home has had it for 10 years. We've had maybe two violent episodes during that time," Mark said.

Far more common than the threat of violence is the fear schizophrenics will attempt suicide.

Chris, 38, has lived for seven months at Heritage Lodge, a home he credits with helping him turn his life around. But his journey to the group home is heartbreaking.

Chris grew up in a small town in southern Ontario, the eldest of five children raised by alcoholic parents. Life was volatile in his household.

While Chris himself doesn't remember the incident, his mother has told him about the first time his father's violent temper erupted.

Chris was a toddler, sitting in his high chair. He threw his food and some of it landed on his father.

The man picked the child up, high-chair and all, and threw him across the room.

As the physical and emotional abuse persisted, Chris retreated into a lonely inner world where he became increasingly angry about his life at home.



STAFF PHOTO/ROB ALARY

Chris (centre) talks about his life as Heritage Lodge directors Julie Mark and Mike Hickie offer support. Chris suffered abuse from the time he was a toddler and lived for years in an abandoned house in Toronto. He found solace in the Newmarket group home — a place he and 19 other people call home.

"I became just a loner. I had a wall around me and I thought I was looneytoons," he said.

"I couldn't understand why some guys could be laughing and happy at home and I wasn't."

Meanwhile, deemed a behavioural problem at school, Chris was put in special classes and shuffled from one grade to the next, although he wasn't learning much.

'I didn't care if I lived or died. I didn't care where my next meal was coming from.'

At 11, he ran away and somehow contacted a social worker, explaining the horror going on in his home.

The worker visited the family but his mother forced her to leave the house. Chris' parents then turned the tables on him, having the courts designate him an unmanageable child. He spent the next year in a group home.

Chris returned home for a year but ran away for good at the age of 14. He landed on the streets of Toronto, spending five years living in an abandoned house.

Chris panhandled, sold drugs, guzzled alcohol and committed minor thefts to feed an addiction to speed, which, ironically, made him feel less hyperactive.

"My whole life was — wake up, try to get food, if you couldn't get food, you would get drugs."

While others lived in the house, Chris was a loner — both because

he didn't know how to interact properly with others and because others viewed him as "insane" because he was so frenzied.

One day in 1980, Chris woke up and decided on the spot to leave Toronto. He had enough money for a bus ticket to Winnipeg, so that's where he headed.

Paranoid that the "authorities" would discover his identity and send him home, Chris continued his anti-social lifestyle of living on the streets, taking drugs and picking up the odd job if the paycheque was offered under the table.

"I didn't care if I lived or died. I didn't care where my next meal was coming from."

Eventually he drifted to Calgary, where he got his first real job, working for a time as a labourer on an oil field. He tried to clean up his life, although he remained on drugs.

He married a native Canadian girl, living on a reserve in northern Alberta. But her family didn't approve of the inter-racial marriage. He left his wife.

Chris met his second wife, an alcoholic, while he was seeking treatment for his drug addiction at a rehab centre.

He had gone after seeing a child get struck by lightning in Calgary.

Chris believed the incident was a sign from God who was telling him he would be struck by lightning if he didn't go straight.

He remained off drugs for several years but he was having delusions because of the schizophrenia.

Chris left his second wife just months before their baby was born, taking up his old drug habit again.

He then found work as a carry

with a travelling amusement park company. When the show pulled into Toronto, his old haunting grounds, Chris decided to seek help again for his drug addiction.

He was admitted to the detox program at St. Michael's Hospital.

Last June, Chris found himself at Porter Place, a shelter for homeless men north of Newmarket.

A worker at the shelter noticed Chris' unusual behaviour and recognized the apparent signs of mental illness.

Chris was referred to Heritage Lodge, through which he is seeing a psychiatrist and was put on medication.

'I asked him to apologize to me for what he did when I was a kid, but he wouldn't.'

Meanwhile, twice in the past couple of years he has seen his father, who is now on his deathbed.

Chris admits to a perverse sense of satisfaction at seeing his father in pain, remembering the years of abuse he suffered at the man's hand.

"I asked him to apologize to me for what he did when I was a kid, but he wouldn't," he said. "But I have told him 'I forgive you'."

Today, Chris is celebrating the fact he has been clean for 18 months.

"I'm grateful I'm alive. I'm grateful everything has come to this point. I'm even glad to know I'm a schizophrenic."

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