

north shore news

A place of help and hope for recovery

Turning Point 9-bed centre welcomes its first residents this month

Jeremy Shepherd / North Shore News

August 24, 2014 12:00 AM

Nine women wake a little after sunrise on an August morning in North Vancouver, wondering how to work and rest and live and love for the rest of their lives without drinking.

Shuttered by a shroud of trees at the north end of Lloyd Avenue, what initially looks like a bucolic bed and breakfast is the North Shore's first and only women's alcohol recovery centre.

The women do chores and meditate. They try yoga and art therapy and they say the things they thought were unmentionable.

Group sessions are a place to rouse the emotions they spent years sedating and silencing with beer and wine.

Those conversations can happen because of the efforts of Turning Point executive director Brenda Plant and District of North Vancouver Coun. Doug MacKay-Dunn, who championed the facility despite objections voiced by neighbourhood residents.

"We're just trying to help people rebuild their lives," Plant says.

During a tour of the house, Plant explains the health standards that must be observed in the kitchen and the lack of closet doors, an intentional omission intended to foster organization and cleanliness in the clients.

The program evolved from Alcoholics Anonymous and takes an abstinence-based approach, albeit with fewer religious overtones.

Admiring the fishbearing creek that runs alongside the house, MacKay-Dunn mentions the importance of nature as "a higher power."

The term carries some ambivalence for Plant, who categorizes Turning Point's

approach as spiritual but not religious.

When attempting to treat his own alcoholism, Bill Wilson, the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, drew inspiration from fundamentalist religious organization the Oxford Group. While Turning Point's approach is rooted in similar principles, there's also a willingness to incorporate new, proven techniques.

The women go over basics like hygiene, job applications and nutrition.

The program typically lasts between three and four months, with increasing levels of independence for the women who do their chores and keep up with their individual plans.

The first nine women to occupy the house will represent the full spectrum of recovery.

"We don't want to have nine people figuring it out all at once," Plant says, explaining senior residents will help the newcomers.

Both Plant and MacKay-Dunn see the

centre as part of a broader effort to erase a stigma and banish the phrase "He should just stop," from the English language.

"Tell the diabetic to just stop being a diabetic," Plant says.

Sheila isn't her real name.

Even with a new job, a new life and eight years of sobriety, Sheila worries revealing her real name will get her fired.

She took her first drink at 14.

"I stole it from my dad," she recalls. "I guzzled two beer and then I puked in the bathtub. And I loved it."

Her father was a hardworking family man with a great sense of humour. And he drank.

"He would come home from work and you'd never know if he would be sober or not," she says. "He used to beat up my mom."

At about the age of 11, Sheila tried to be her mom's bodyguard.

"Many times I stood

in front of her," she says.

"I was filled with fear. My whole upbringing."

The beer dulled her anxiety and dimmed her feelings.

It was a relief. "At first it was just on the weekends. But then it got to a point where I really wanted to have it. I couldn't stand the life I was living. I had no control, I had no power, and the only time I got a reprieve was when I was drinking."

For the next few years she worked steadily.

"I was a hard worker, too. I'm just like my dad," she says.

At 18, she started working at The Sidetrack, a pub under the Alex Fraser Bridge where The Accused with Jodie Foster was filmed.

"After we closed the pub it was basically open bar. I just got right hammered every night and drove home," she says.

Bright and industrious, Sheila kept her life together, landing a job as a customs broker at the airport.

She was making good money but her drinking worsened. She'd walked away from car wrecks and was using harder drugs, including crack cocaine.

After calling in sick too often, she was fired.

Whether by oversight or wilful avoidance, no one realized she had a problem.

"I don't think anybody knew," she says. "Maybe they did know, but nobody said anything."

At 28 years old she was on the street, stealing to support herself.

"I wasn't good at it," she says, laughing loudly at the memory of swiping a stairclimber.

After a few trips to jail she found her way to detox.

Sheila was sober for four years.

Discussing that period of her life, Sheila repeats a single phrase: "I just wanted to get everything back."

She focused on work, squirrelling money away for a condo.

She also stopped going to meetings.

"People in recovery

would point that out to me, so I stopped hanging out with them."

A relapse was coming but she had no idea how to stop it.

After realizing she needed more help, she decided to try Turning Point.

The centre was less militaristic in its discipline than others, but it's the little things Sheila remembers.

"They gave me responsibilities like kitchen monitor. I know this sounds funny to you," she says, laughing. "But it was huge to me at the time."

They trusted me with the key to the kitchen and all the food. .. When I thought of myself as nothing but a thief before, they give you a little bit of responsibility and some trust."

The treatment focused on relapse prevention, impressing on her that a relapse happens long before you have a drink in your hand.

The centre let Sheila stay until she could get into subsidized housing.

Today, she dedicates her time to two women suffering from cerebral

palsy. She takes them out, makes sure they're taking their medication. They go swimming together and even on vacation.

"I make their lives happy."

Turning Point is slated to pay the district \$1 a year for the next 60 years as part of their lease agreement.

A few of the centre's

clients will pay \$150 a day but most will pay far less.

In order to get grants from the federal government, most Turning Point clients have to be at risk of homelessness.

"We serve people who

are marginal and who can't afford to go to places like Edgewood or Orchard," Plant says, referring to Nanaimo's treatment centre and Bowen Island's recovery centre that caters to executives and highincome

earners. Plant estimates the money spent per patient at Turning Point is about one-fifth the cost of treating that same patient at a hospital emergency room.

For MacKay-Dunn, who responded to countless Man Down calls while walking a beat for the Vancouver Police Department, the new centre is only the beginning. He's hopeful the recovery centre will eventually be augmented with second-stage housing.

"There desperately needs to be a men's facility as well," he says. "It's an area of health services that is grossly underserved."

The wait list was almost full before the centre opened its doors, according to Plant.

"We lose too many people off our wait list to relapse," she notes.

There was some resistance from the community, including a failed petition to push the centre out of the neighbourhood.

Despite the fact that a house had occupied the site for nearly 40 years, and despite that not a single tree was cut down to make room for the centre, many residents said they were aghast at parkland being taken away.

Council received a few letters, ostensibly from children, asking if they would still be able to feed the ducks in a nearby pond.

"I understand that people are concerned," MacKay-Dunn says. "We're not going to have a bunch of dope fiends in here. We're not going to have people trafficking drugs that you might find in Pemberton Heights or in upper Lynn Valley or in Deep Cove."

People struggling with addiction need to get help in their own communities rather than being exiled to the Downtown Eastside, according to MacKay-Dunn.

"If this is successful, people will be less inclined to be concerned about a similar facility in their neighbourhood," he says.

The facility is supported by the Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, headed by new Pastor Jennifer Marlor.

The church dropped off welcome baskets for the centre's first nine residents, something they plan to do every three months.

"Just a way to say, 'You are loved,'" Marlor explains.