

## **St Vincent's Stories**

Here are some of the many success stories we have seen at St Vincent's over the years.

### ***View from a CARAT Team in a woman's prison on the outskirts of London.***

As a CARAT drug team, we have been referring clients to St Vincent's for many years now. Our role is to help substance misusers manage a change in their lives whilst they are in custody: St Vincent's role is to help them to manage this change in the community. St Vincent's acts as a bridge between custody and the community, taking over when our work stops.

Traditionally, there are only two options for the resettlement of substance misusers after their release: a housing option which merely provide shelter, or the 'rehab' option which is often too far in the other direction. St Vincent's sits in the middle, they deal with the core issues of drug and housing issues but also with other issues such as emotional, family and issues of life skills.

As a CARAT team, we are part of the Crime Reduction Initiative (CRI), and we have Supported Housing ourselves. However, we prefer to work with St Vincent's; they are more on the ball, our clients have far more success with them and we have more contact with St Vincent's. They always follow things through, they keep us informed about the clients we referred to them and liaise with us when there are issues. The real difference with St Vincent's is that they see people as individuals; they don't have pre-formed ideas of whom they are going to work with.

St Vincent's does what it says it does, we have an enormous faith in the work they do. They always take the necessary time to assess someone, make them feel comfortable and welcomed. We are geographically quite far from Bristol but it feels like St Vincent's is closer than many local projects.

St Vincent's does a fantastic job. I'd like to see a St Vincent's in every town in the country. I'm not only saying that from my perspective but the people we referred to St Vincent's tell us that it does work. St Vincent's has now gained quite a reputation in the prison, many of the women come up to see us and say, "We want to two to St Vincent's." We cannot refer everyone there so we need to choose. Even if they do not end up going there, they feel quite special about having been considered, they feel it is a proof that they are going in the right direction.

***You are superstars in the land of resettlement!***

## **Wendy's Story**

I can't thank St Vincent's enough for all that they have done for Alex. Alex, now 25, had been in St Vincent's for seven and a half months before he was finally sentenced. Alex had a history of heavy use of soft drugs before migrating to using cocaine very heavily. He had established a lifestyle of non-conformity, drug use and failing to realise his academic potential in the years before he moved out of his home at 17.

From 17 to 24 his life progressively became less supportable. He drifted out of accommodation which his mother and step father helped him to find and away from employment with his father and family friends. In the twelve months before his arrest he lost contact with his parents and their new families and was drifting into heavy cocaine use. He was mixing according to Wendy very much with a wrong crowd, possibly being exploited, but certainly beginning to engage in activities for which his previous life had not prepared him. Wendy prefers to think that he was not engaged in any supply of drugs or other criminality and certainly Alex has not said that he was doing such things.

Alex's downfall, or possibly his salvation, according to his sister, came the night that he and a friend were out at a club and were trying to buy drinks with counterfeit notes. Alex and his friend were arrested. Ecstasy was found and Alex admitted that it was his and had nothing to do with his friend. Having owned to that, he spent over 16 hours in police custody and was severely shocked and shaken. In his mother's words, "he hit rock bottom" at this point. His parents and sister were to leave for their annual holiday and he felt he could not tell them what had happened and so spoil their holiday. He had therefore to negotiate the arrest and subsequent period on remand on his own.

He was offered help at this stage of arrest and subsequent investigation and with enthusiasm, took it. His problems worsened as he was found to have ecstasy, cocaine, scales and money in his rented room. He said he was looking after it for a friend. His mother thinks that this is probably the case, as by this stage Alex was so broken that he was talking about so much that he had been doing and trying to reconnect with his family.

He was referred to St Vincent's for supported accommodation. His probation officer wanted him to be in St Vincent's, because as Wendy said, it had a good reputation in the South West for really being a dry house and for offering support and structure which Alex would need. Alex was referred to a day programme to tackle his drug use and problems.

However, it has not been plain sailing: Wendy arrived with Alex on the day he was to move in, and it was found that he had used a little cannabis. So out went Alex and all his belongings back with Wendy to Oxfordshire to spend the next 28 days getting the cannabis out of his system and to have him tested for any on-going use. Alex had let his family down again and not surprisingly his mother was disappointed at having again to two through a period of testing Alex and managing more lies.

Wendy says that she had no idea about drugs and alcohol abuse or crime and that she was fearful as to what world Alex was entering in moving into St Vincent's. However, she speaks of the atmosphere of St Vincent's, "It just strikes you as very friendly and open, as a very positive atmosphere."

Wendy speaks of the staff and the support and guidance that they offer with admiration. "I don't know how the staff have the patience and stamina to do what they do everyday and to really help those people." "I can't say enough good things about St Vincent's and the support and help. It's absolutely amazing to do what you do."

She speaks of the ways in which she has had her eyes opened as Alex has introduced her to people living at St Vincent's; people who "talk to you and tell you about their own childhoods and problems, people who are very open and honest with you". "Out here in the country, we've not had any involvement with people like that. I don't know what I was expecting, not people with two heads, but I just didn't know what to expect. Being at St Vincent's has also given us a completely different outlook on things."

Wendy thinks that the support that Alex received and the ways in which he was encouraged to develop himself, to do the right things at St Vincent's helped him when he returned to court. Alex was making huge efforts to make changes in his life and she felt that the judge could see this and this is why he received a lighter sentence than he might have done.

Alex will be returning to St Vincent's in early 2007. He will be on a tag and on licence. He will be expected to continue the effective work that he began on himself and has managed to maintain in prison, despite the difficulties of getting away from drugs, even in the drug-free wings.

Wendy is deeply moved as she talks of the ways in which she has her Alex back. He is "as he was always meant to be. The difference is unbelievable. Now he is honest and truthful. He is able to have sensible discussions. He is joy to be with; he is the boy he should have been. He is kind and caring, grateful for the help that he has received. He says he has the tools to manage his addictions and his problems. He spends time trying to be kind to others and to help others. He has been asked if he wants to become a Listener and has been campaigning to be elected onto the council to tackle drugs in prison."

As Wendy keeps repeating she cannot speak highly enough of St Vincent's. It has been instrumental for her, in getting her son back. She is anxious when she thinks that St Vincent's may be under threat. "There is a need for more St Vincent's not less. The drugs problem is not going away and people need to have this sort of support."

## **Holly's Story**

This time last year I could not see beyond the bars at my window and the razor wire covering the fence tops. Today I can watch the colours of the sunrise fill the whole sky. Twelve months ago I never imagined I would have been sitting where I am now and writing this story.

Even before I was locked up in jail I had been a prisoner. Trapped in a cycle of alcohol abuse, drug misuse and crazy thinking. I have made many attempts to escape myself. As a teenager I was often reported missing by my family. After sleeping rough, staying in hostels or on the floors of filthy squats, I'd end up back on their doorstep, distressed and exhausted.

I joined the military, thinking that might bring some order to my life and prevent me from taking illegal drugs. This plan failed. A few years later, after a violent relationship mixed with alcohol, I was depressed and looking for a new direction. Going travelling for a year I felt physically free, but still searching for something, usually at the bottom of a bottle. Returning to education I got a Degree, but still I wasn't happy. Another relationship had ended, after I decided not to have our child; I knew I would not have been able to cope with a baby.

Living with my family was not an option. I hated them watching my every move. Live-in jobs were the solution for a while. Then whenever I had enough money I would leave the country. Working in tourist resorts I could hide my excessive behaviour in the holiday atmosphere, but I was not having fun; despite the continuous sunshine it could not warm my dying soul.

Going around in circles, I left a trail of destruction wherever I went. As the years went by I began to run out of ideas. Aimlessly wandering I had no real friends. I had to rely on people who were as equally damaged as I was for support and places to stay. Totally at their mercy I had little choice but to allow them to treat me however they wanted to. I lost my self-respect, dignity and at times my sanity. The harsher the situation became the more substances I would take and when I was not able to take any more abuse I would explode.

Going to see doctors and into psychiatric hospitals became a routine. What was wrong with me? No one had an answer. The traumas I experienced continued and in response I became a monster. Drinking alcohol and taking drugs when I was in a bad frame of mind became a lethal combination. I began to commit violent offences. I lost count of the number of nights I spent in police cells. Sometimes I would wake up not knowing what I had done.

When I received my first Probation Order I felt everything come crashing down. How could I get back to so-called normal life now?

Spending some time in a refuge straightened me out enough until I got a Council flat. On my own again I sank to new depths in order to get alcohol, drugs and money. I did not last long in that flat. My family were at their wits end, on my next offence I refused to be bailed to their address, believing it to be best all round. I knew it might have seemed ridiculous to other people, but I chose to have a custodial sentence. Out there on a Probation order I had only got worse. I longed to clean up my act and feel secure. The real world scared me by now and I was fearful of what I might do under the influence.

I received one letter from my mother during my sentence telling me the locks had been changed and that I was no longer welcome. Inside I tried convincing myself that this was it, I would change and never drink alcohol or touch drugs again. Walking out of the prison gates to nothing and no one I drank within fifteen minutes and was back in the cells after forty-eight hours.

Spending a few weeks over Christmas out on bail, in a living hell of yet more abuse, I was filled with feelings of hopelessness so went back to prison. This time I was broken. I had run out of fronts to put on. Realising this would keep happening till I dealt with the root of the problem I decided to take action myself. All my life Social Services had only provided me with short-term fixes, if any at all. This time I knew I needed a long-term solution. The priority was a safe, supportive environment to live and this is where St Vincent's came in.

I arrived here with one prison bag containing a change of clothes. Now I will need a van to move to my own flat. I can honestly say that choosing to come to St Vincent's not only saved my life, but also helped me build a new one. I could not have continued living as I did. Gradually I have been able to heal the wounds of the past. Being surrounded by people who understand where I have come from has been a safe place for me to open up and accept support. Physically I started taking good care of myself and now I wake up feeling alive. At first days, then weeks and before long months passed without a major crisis.

Building bridges with my family has begun with a few short visits. One day I can see us having the healthy relationship we have never had. I have enjoyed my first sober summer, spending evenings out with true friends, watching the world two by. Life isn't so terrifying after all. I go to college, it has taken a while to get in to it, but now my level of concentration is better than ever. Doing voluntary work has also proved to me that criminal convictions do not necessarily prevent someone from getting a job.

Regardless of the practical things I can now do, it is the peace in my heart that is priceless. My anger has dissolved and been replaced by a sense of calm. Sometimes I find myself smiling for no particular reason. Naturally there are ups and downs, but my worst day now isn't even as bad as the best days of my past. This is the longest I have stayed in any one place in over fifteen years. Usually I would have run by now, so something is working.

By the time I got here I had absolutely nothing left to lose. Yet what I have achieved in a matter of months, by staying clean and sober is nothing short of a miracle. It is for this second chance at life that I owe a great deal to St Vincent's. I do not know what my future holds, but at least I can now say I have had one good year of living after thirty-three years of simply surviving.

## **Graham's Story**

I had been drinking since I was 13. I lived near Newcastle and I remember as a kid how I used to go and sit next to the A1, looking at a road sign indication "The South" thinking, "One day I will two there".

I left the North East in 1991 as I was offered a job in Surrey as support worker for people with learning difficulties. Things were going well, I got married and had a child. Then my wife and I split in 1994 and I started drinking more heavily and progressed to drugs. It got to a point where I would drink as soon as I was not working. I became more and more depressed and had no choice but to quit my job. I was £13,000 in debt because of my drinking habit and the missed payments for my mortgage. I sold my flat and went back to the North East.

By 2001 I had started taking heroin and was living in a flat where heroin and cannabis was consumed regularly. I decided I needed to stop and managed to stay clean for 41 days. However, I got convicted for possession of cannabis that I was keeping for a friend. 2 months later, I found a job in Aldershot, I was drinking regularly but not to the levels I had before. Some time after having started work, my CRB clearance came to my employer and I was fired because of my conviction for possession of cannabis. I could not pay the rent anymore and ended up on the street. I donated all I had apart from a change of clothes and a sleeping bag to a charity shop and started sleeping rough.

I drifted in that way for years, sleeping rough and using drugs. In 2005, I went into rehab, following the example of a person I was seeing at the time. As it became clear that this relationship was not going to continue, I left the centre and started doing heroin and drinking again.

I decided to go to Berkshire to see my son, but ended sleeping rough there for a month. This is when I entered a rehabilitation programme for the final time. I stayed there until 31st January.

When I left, my head was still battered up even though I had been clean and sober for some time.

I accepted a place at St Vincent's. This place has really helped me. They have given me a home, not just somewhere to live. It is the first time I feel settled. Before I was always moving, I struggled inside and I was afraid of staying somewhere.

My support worker has been great. We have built trust, which is something I don't do easily.

I have now been offered a place of my own in Berkshire near to my son. It is a tough decision whether to stay or to move on. Am I ready? I won't know until I do it. What is sure is that I have been through rough times since I arrived at St Vincent's but without the staff I don't know where I'd be right now...

## ***Justin's Story***

I'm Justin. I'm 33 and I arrived at St Vincent's House in January 2006. I came here from prison after serving my first short period of custody.

Whilst I was in prison I came to realise and accept that I was an alcoholic. I knew my drinking had become a serious problem because it was ruling my day-to-day life, and going without a drink for even a short period of time was causing withdrawal.

With the help of the Prison Service I secured accommodation at St Vincent's House upon my release. I detoxed whilst in prison and was clean and sober for the required 28 days prior to arriving.

I did not know what to expect. I had never sought help for my drink problem. On arrival I was made to feel extremely welcome by the staff and by the residents who were sharing similar experiences.

I struggled to cope in the first few months but there was always someone to talk to or to point me in the direction of help. I was also, quite rightly, pulled up when my behaviour was unacceptable.

I've been at St Vincent's for nine months now and it is the best life decision I've ever taken. I've begun to make amends for all the hurt I've caused friends and family over the years and I've finally started to grow up.

I would highly recommend St Vincent's to anyone who wishes to quit drink or drugs. It may not be easy but the help and support provided here gives that first step needed on life.

## ***Gregory's Story***

I spent 23 years in active addiction and all that goes with that by way of criminal activity and jail. I was jailed for theft, deception, drug dealing. I used drugs and alcohol including crack, heroin, speed, ecstasy, pretty much anything.

I had been a working man who owned his own house. I ended up sleeping in shop doorways and on bus stop benches. I went from being a productive member of society to being a down and out. It was embarrassing and shameful... I thought of suicide, and planned how I would do it many times. I just could not see a way out of doing what I was doing.

At this time I did not care who I trampled on, walked over or ripped off: it could be family, friends, members of the public or people like myself. I just didn't care.

By my last jail sentence I knew that I needed to do something different as I just could not two on as I was. What I couldn't do was go back to my own town with nowhere to live as this would have meant going straight back to my old life.

Being in jail actually helped me as the CARATS (Counselling, Assessment, Referral, Advice and Throughcare) team were able to find me a place to live at St Vincent's. I applied and was successful.

On the day of my release, after four years inside, it was only my fear of going back my old life and letting my family down that drove me to St Vincent's door. I arrived nervous and anxious, shy and uptight.

That first afternoon I had to go to probation and I felt so unlike myself. St Vincent's and all these changes were scary but also warm and inviting.

For the first couple of weeks I was very quiet and withdrawn. I did not communicate with people because of my past and just being out of jail and thinking that everyone was judging me. But as I started going to the groups and speaking to people I began to feel ok. Being with the women in the house was really very very scary as I was not used to communicating with women without a chemical or alcohol inside me.

I went to the Fellowship meetings of NA (Narcotics Anonymous) and did lots of service there and built up connections in the area. I got a sponsor and starting to work the 12 step programme.

I stayed in St Vincent's main hostel for six months and then moved onto their move-on accommodation, sharing a flat with one other man. While I was there I worked as a volunteer painter and decorator and handyman at the main hostel. Living in the flat, I was much more independent: there was no-one to make me get up for groups and so on. It all depended on me being self-motivated. I became more manageable. I kept on with my voluntary work and attending NA meetings.

I had my first Christmas and birthday outside for four years. That was really something.

I stayed in the move-on flat for four months and then got my own flat through the Bristol City Council Priority Move-on scheme. Having my own flat was scary with the bills and all the things to buy and sort out. In the end I found that all the things that I was scared of were quite simple. I carried on with my voluntary work.

After months in the community to show that I could develop a routine and manage on my own I am now working as a paid staff member at St Vincent's.