

Tammy's Story

"I know that we can all get better with the right help and I encourage women to empower themselves to get better."

A Difficult Start

Tammy did not have an easy start to life. She was born to a drug addicted teenage mother and was herself addicted to heroin at birth. Her biological mother's sister and husband stepped in and adopted her, but this only led to new horrors as she became the victim of child sexual abuse. Tammy went on for a long while pretending to feel normal and do all the other things kids her age did. However, she never felt the same. She developed behavioural issues and ate to soothe herself. Upon looking back, Tammy says food was her first addiction. She went to school and got an education and eventually a job as a hairstylist, all the while feeling less than and unimportant.

She began using drugs and continued down what she calls "that ugly road" for many years. She committed crimes and felt that her life was out of control. Tammy ended up getting arrested and convicted of a drug related offence, for which she received 8 years in prison. While there, she had another 2 years added on for bad behaviour. When she got out, she struggled to get better, but had no luck. She was returned to custody many times and continued living, as she describes, "an inappropriate lifestyle, moving from one inappropriate relationship to another."

A Turning Point

At her lowest point, Tammy became homeless and it was then that she was viciously attacked, beaten, and left seriously injured. During her recovery, which included a multitude of surgeries, she realized that she needed help and wanted to get better from the horrid disease called addiction.

Tammy got an alcohol and drug counselor who helped her find housing at the Karis Society, where she also took all the programs available at the time. In addition, she was assigned a counsellor for trauma through the Elizabeth Fry Society. Through these supports, Tammy was able to finally start healing mentally from all the trauma she had endured as a child, as a teen and as an adult.

She then went on to take an employment program through the John Howard Society. Tammy felt that maybe, after so many lost years, she could actually stay the course of sobriety and find a job. And with the help of her counsellors, she did just that. She got a job working at a ladies retail clothing store and then at The John Howard Society's café.



Giving Back, Moving Forward

Tammy's desire to help people with similar struggles led her to start volunteering with several organizations. She volunteered with the Food Bank and House of Hope, where women were first getting sober off the street or from prison. Tammy was later hired by UBC for a research program called Unlocking the Gates where she helps women access resources like housing, doctors, income assistance, etc. In addition, Tammy does lots of public speaking to share her story for the organizations that helped her during her time of need: "All these programs and people helped save my life, so, therefore, I feel a deep

need to give back in whatever way I can."

As of January 2016, when Tammy spoke at a United Way event, she reported being 5 years and 4 months sober. She acknowledged that her life is busy, but she feels fulfilled and has love for herself and others. "When you learn to love yourself," Tammy explains, "you start to take care of yourself physically and I have lost 130 pounds over the last two years..." Tammy has also gone on to buy her own car, rent her own place, and got engaged to the man of her dreams. She also says she is diligent in ensuring that she lives "in an honest, forthright and law abiding manner."

United Way believes in moving people from poverty to possibility

Tammy's story is a good illustration of how people's needs are often complex and overlapping. For this reason, the United Way CSO is proud to partner with the above three agencies and many others that can work together to provide all the services necessary to meet residents' multifaceted needs.