

› Sierra Van Straaten, former Dan's Legacy client and current Board Secretary, now enjoys life without drugs and is on track for a bright future.



COMMUNITY

# DAN'S LEGACY

## FROM TRAUMA TRAGEDY TO SECOND CHANCE AT A SUCCESSFUL WAY OF LIFE

by Laurie Jones | photography by Robert Stefanowicz

The opioid crisis that is claiming, or ruining lives of young people around the world has been a top news focus for months. In our cities and towns, many young people have fallen into a culture of drugs and life on the streets, sometimes from necessity due to abuse or trauma at home.

In other cases, teens from middle- to upper-class families secretly endure traumatic events leading to drug use as a coping mechanism. The addiction goes on, sometimes unnoticed, until the young person reaches a breaking point. The family members are often completely unaware that their child was suffering with the pain of mental illness.

But thanks to the efforts of the team at Dan's Legacy – a non-profit organization founded in memory of nineteen-year-old Dan who overdosed in 2006 after trying to suppress psychological pain from sexual abuse while working on a fishing boat – young lives are changing, moving in a positive direction and they can see the path to a meaningful future.

Barbara Coates, executive director of Dan's Legacy says while several organizations for adults deal with entrenched addiction, not as many are working with youth. "The most important factor we focus on with our programs is the trauma origins of

mental health issues that lead to drug addictions. We offer a four-month intervention program for 15- to 25-year-old youths that includes 16 weekly counselling sessions, but the clients (youths) have to want to participate, they are not sent to us through the courts or other mandated programs."

She explains that Dan's Legacy provides therapeutic, one-on-one counselling to help people with depression, eating and sleeping disorders, anxiety and other issues.

"The majority of our clients have little support from family members, if they have any family at all," says Coates. "They have often grown up in foster care or are homeless, which creates significant barriers to accessing mental health programs through the government or with private counselling." She adds trauma doesn't just have to be from violence or abuse, it can also come from neglect.



› Dan: August 31, 1986 – August 27, 2006.

Tom Littlewood, program director and counsellor for Dan's Legacy, has been helping people in crisis for over 40 years, including ten years as a police counsellor. "I decided I wanted to make a change to work more closely with youth, trying to

reach them before they were too entrenched in the drug world," he says. "In 1987, I started an organization called the Sanctuary Foundation and I ran that for about 20 years. We took kids from the street and trained



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them to be bike mechanics, ski hill techs, marine techs, or computer techs. Training programs like those will soon be options for clients at Dan's Legacy."

The cost for each participant in the four-month intervention is \$1,000. Some families can pay for the services, but the majority of young people involved in Dan's Legacy are being helped by a bursary program. "We're working with a lot of kids who are aging out of care. Most at risk youth don't have the funds, and they don't have family support to pay for the program," says Coates. "Private counselling ranges from \$150-\$200 an hour. Our intervention is accessible and affordable. In the 16 weeks, we have a 50 percent success rate in helping the kids to stabilize."

She says the counsellors have a holistic approach with cognitive behaviour therapy, dialectic behavioural therapy, mindfulness, diet, and exercise. "When kids approach one of our therapists and say they are interested in the program, the therapists explain what will be expected of them and even at that point, 25 percent are not ready to commit. But we stay in touch with them. The reason we have such a high success

rate is because they all want to be there, they all want to be helped. The 25 percent who have experienced such dramatic torture and abuse that they need more support than the standard four-month program are provided counselling as long as needed but that too has a high success rate."

One Delta resident who had her own issues with mental health and addiction is 24-year-old Sierra Van Straaten. Working with Littlewood, she is off drugs and is now a member of the board for Dan's Legacy.

➤ From left: Littlewood provides music therapy at the FASD (fetal alcohol spectrum disorder) workshop; Culinary skills for youth create paths for future jobs; Warm meals and friendship bonds at Aunt Leah's Place bring smiles.



➤ Counsellor, mentor and friend, Tom Littlewood shares a story with Sierra Van Straaten during a break.





Here is her story:

**M**y name is Sierra and I am navigating my way into adulthood as a recovering crystal meth addict. I have concurrent mental health disorders such as borderline personality disorder, depression, anxiety, polysubstance use disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder, all stemming from a childhood cancer diagnosis and a distorted view on life through my adolescent years.

I was involved in a series of progressively worse, long-term abusive relationships that whittled away at my already dangerously low self-esteem. I went into a depressive episode that gave birth to a crystal meth addiction – and a few years of sleepless nights for my parents – while I threw a giant temper tantrum (as I’ve come to see it) on the streets of Surrey.

I’ve been arrested, I’ve gone to the psych ward, I’ve even spent time in homeless shelters. I had finally

admitted defeat within myself when I agreed to start seeing Tom (at my mother’s persistent requests). I realized I needed help as I had been closet using for six months and my life had reached a point where it was no longer manageable. I was miserable. I wasn’t able to do anything BUT make my weekly session with Tom.

Many of my sessions with Tom were spent listening to his stories, and I would cry. It was the beginning of me loving myself. Tom made a point of telling me that he saw a beaming, intelligent, beautiful young woman who had something special to offer the world. I truly believe that about myself today after years of self-loathing and self-mutilating.

Being involved with Dan’s Legacy has given me the insight and the tools needed to be able to regulate my emotions, control my thoughts, understand what is truly important, and be empowered enough to go get whatever I want in life. I am now enrolled at Douglas College with an

end goal of receiving my Masters in Counselling.

I feel like Tom has helped me finally grow up. Now I think about what kind of person I want to be when no one is watching, and I always want to do the right thing. I have learned to work with my parents, not against them. I am living at home at 24 and working on rebuilding the relationship I destroyed in my addiction, one day at a time, and I am truly enjoying every minute of the process. I am more than happy to abide by my 10 pm curfew and give mom my car keys so that she can sleep peacefully at night. She deserves that much. I show my respect and gratitude for the two people who are still there after everything I put them through and everything I did to them. I am grateful just to be welcome in their home.

Today I am a business owner and thanks to Dan’s Legacy, I am looking forward to my future for the first time in a very, very long time. >

**T**he positive results being achieved from Dan’s Legacy participants has not gone unnoticed, with businesses and people wanting to get on board to help. Peter Buxton, Delta resident, lawyer and director on the Delta Police Board was moved by a presentation Coates and Littlewood made to the Delta Police Board in 2017. “I was quite taken by the video that featured people in the program and the successes they had,” he says. “As soon as the presentation ended, I approached Barb and Tom and told them I wanted to make a donation, and I wanted to get involved with the organization. It really struck a chord in my heart.”

Buxton says in his work with personal injury cases, he’s seen traumatic repercussions from family life, accidents and other issues. “I routinely work with psychologists to help assist my clients, and that’s what Dan’s Legacy is doing. It’s a wraparound program that provides multifaceted treatment strategies.”

The BC provincial government also recognized the successful results and awarded Dan’s Legacy a \$200,000 grant which enabled the organization to hire four more counsellors.

Another program that is making a difference for participants is Dan’s Legacy’s partnership with Aunt Leah’s Place. “We support their life-skills programs with our counselling, and also provide a food bank and weekly Sunday dinner,” says Coates. “During dinner Tom does a five-minute presentation on how counselling could help them, and many youth follow

up with him after that. As he says, you can’t counsel a kid who’s hungry.”

Ongoing fundraising efforts will ensure the programs continue and grow, including a job-skills training program currently in development that will teach youth with barriers to education professional driving, warehouse management and culinary skills.

For people interested in supporting Dan’s Legacy, memberships are available for \$25/year, and the annual fundraising gala will be held at the Beach Grove Golf Club in Tsawwassen on November 6th. For more information contact Barbara Coates at 604.329.9186 or go to [www.danslegacy.com](http://www.danslegacy.com). ■

**See page 13 for a listing of resources.**

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> From left: Funding from Minister Judy Darcy helped Dan’s Legacy hire four new therapists; Telus grant to Dan’s Legacy for the culinary program with Coast Mental Health; Youth make drums at the FASD workshop.

