

# Been there

By **CARL HAHN**  
LIFE staff

The medications helped, but they weren't answering any questions.

Neither were the letters: ADHD or ODD. Even Kevin couldn't understand why he couldn't just get along with everyone. He asked his mom, Janet, "Why is it so difficult?"

"It just about broke my heart," she recalls.

"Kevin" and "Janet" aren't their real names, since neither of them can be identified because Kevin is a young offender, currently in detention. Both are clients of Street Smart Counselling, because it's the place they could find some answers to their questions and start learning to live with Kevin's severe behavioural disorders.

Janet isn't slamming the profession of psychiatry. That's what provides the medications that help Kevin control his Oppositional Defiant Disorder and Attention Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder. But the psychiatrists, school counsellors and others she first encountered didn't help her understand what her son was going through or what to expect in his future.

"I could see him starting to distance himself from us more," she says. "We didn't know how to handle the situation."

Kevin had always been considered stubborn in school. In Grade 6 he was diagnosed with behavioural disorders.

"When he found that out, that didn't go over well," Janet says. "I think that's when his anger really started."

That year he was expelled. His parents started him in a private school in Grade 7 and, after he was expelled from there, Janet home-schooled him for the rest of the year.

Then they started catching him with marijuana. He was into sports, but was caught playing stoned. And nothing was his fault or responsibility.

"We weren't sure what to do and how to address this. My son had been seeing a counsellor."

At the start of Grade 8 in 2006, they gave Street Smart Counselling a try. Hearing the disorders explained by someone who experienced them offered a valuable perspective.

Tom Barthel is the owner, operator and sole counsellor of the business. He's been diagnosed with several mental disorders and was once a drug user and pusher. He's even attempted suicide — the signal to him that something needed to change.

With the help of a broad-minded psychiatrist, holistic remedies, several 12-step programs and a busi-

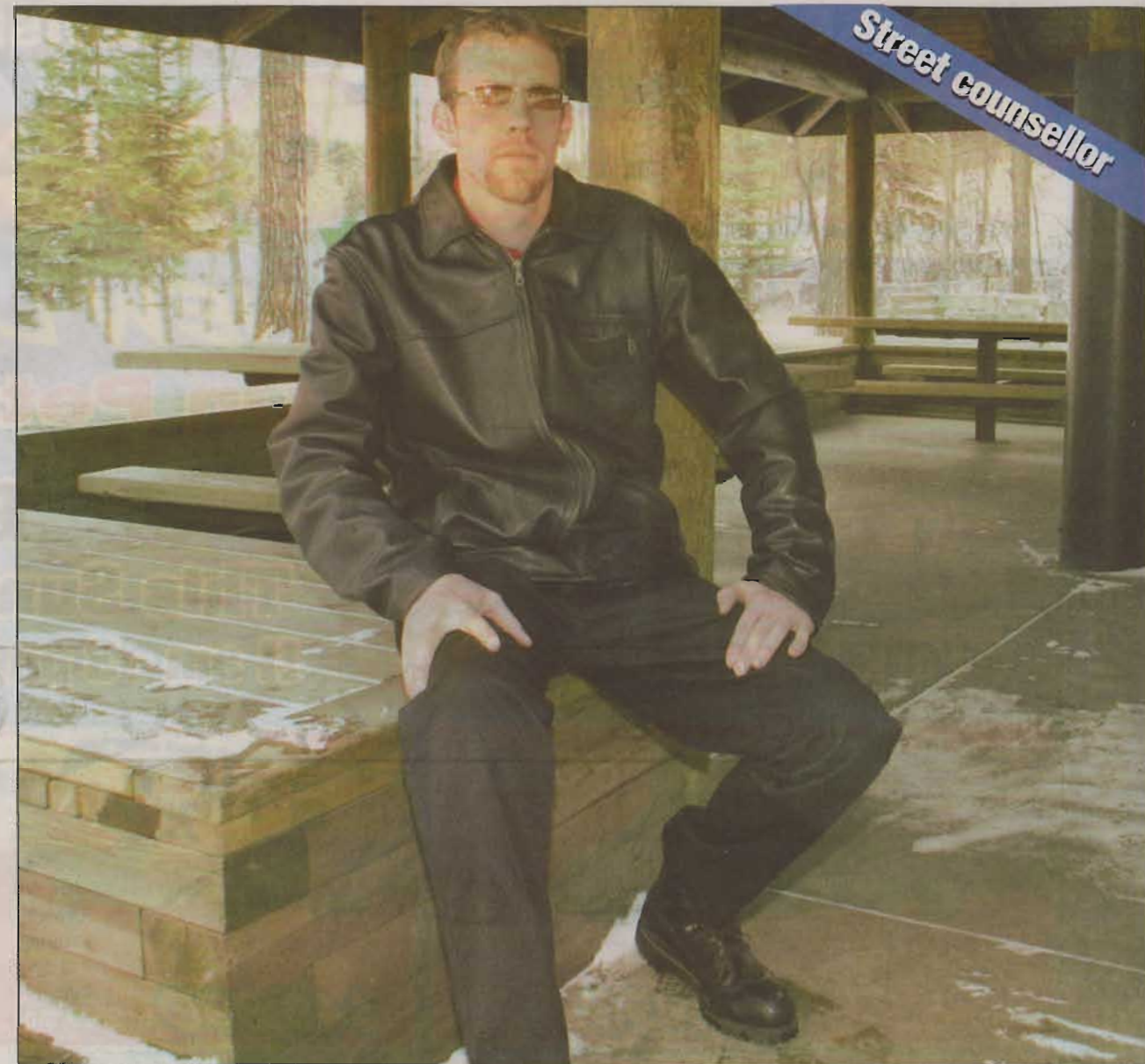


Photo by CARL HAHN/LIFE staff

**Tom Barthel, of Street Smart Counselling, once pondered making this shelter in Rotary Park his home. After meeting the right people in the Helping Hands motorhome, he has overcome his addictions and learned to work with his mental health conditions, and shares his lessons.**

ness seminar on changing your mind-set, Barthel turned his attitudes around. With a lot of introspection, he learned to make his disorders work for him.

He's gotten away from drugs and turned his obsessions toward work and helping other people. A couple of years ago, he started attending two support groups for parents and family members of people with addictions. They encouraged him to share his information with others.

"Sometimes you feel lost as a parent out there. You're not sure how to access things or what to say," says Janet, noting Barthel has some answers to those questions. "Tom's been a big help to us."

Barthel met with Janet and Kevin separately. He was able to explain to Kevin why he acted the way he did, how he was hurting himself with his defiance and how to make his disorders work for him.

"I sell them on how cool it is to have a disorder," he says. "I've got three or four of them, and I'm living the life that every kid would want right now."

He also taught Kevin to respect his medications and told him about some additional alternatives. Kevin rejected one medication with severe side effects but started to embrace the others.

"He recognizes now that he doesn't feel good when

he stops taking them," Barthel says.

"He has a relationship with Tom, he trusts him," Janet says, noting Kevin would seek out Tom when he needed to talk.

Barthel also helped her adjust her expectations. With every new medication or counsellor or psychiatrist, she kept thinking, "This will be the one," hoping in vain that she had finally found what would cure her son.

"You can't fix it overnight," Barthel says. "They have their own timeline."

Removing the unrealistic expectations helps reduce family stress. Although Kevin was convicted of shoplifting after working with Barthel, and later jailed for breaking probation conditions, it's not all bad, Barthel says.

After learning to accept his disorders, Kevin's self-esteem improved, which resulted in making new friends, Barthel explains. Unfortunately, they were the wrong friends. So Kevin got in trouble, but he now recognizes his own accountability.

"He knows why he's there, he admits it, and actively talks to the institution's counsellors," Barthel says.

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"He's moving in a direction that people move in, when they get out of that life and carry on."

Barthel also reminds Kevin's parents that their son needs to experience consequences and learn from them. Learning to love the person without condoning the behaviour has helped Janet communicate more openly with Kevin.

Disorders aren't just bad attitudes, Barthel stresses, and leaning on a kid who has ODD is just going to make matters worse. Support and love are essential, he says, as long as that doesn't translate into protection from consequences and learning opportunities.

"It's real clarity that Tom can grant," Janet says. "I look back and yeah, we've made mistakes, and things we

could have done differently, educated ourselves a little bit more," she says. "The fact is that now he has to learn to take responsibility."

The work has been a benefit to Barthel, too. He's taken on several clients, sometimes just the families to help them understand the person's behaviour. He's also been invited to speak to schools and other organizations about his past and recovery, which is helping remind him that he's on the right path.

"Finding a sense of purpose has straightened everything out," he says. "Doing this has been the final measure I've taken that's removed all cravings or any desire to become intoxicated."

For more information on Street Smart Counselling, call 403-391-4184.

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