

Ex-addict eager to help others

Former dealer starts own part-time counselling business

By CARL HAHN
LIFE staff

He really couldn't blame parents for hating him. It's impossible to estimate how many youths' lives he helped ruin.

"He could have even been the dealer who was selling to our children. We'll never know," says Bonnie, an organizer of ReNew Hope, a support group for parents of children with addictions.

But Tom Barthel is meeting with those parents, and wants them to send their children to spend time with him.

The difference is that, instead of selling them drugs, Barthel would like to show them some promise in life — that there still can be a bright future if they call on their inner strength to beat down the addictions.

As heinous as the 28-year-old once was, picking on high school children to buy his drugs and pay for his own habits, now he's intent on helping families recover from the trauma of addiction.

He's not a psychiatrist, psychologist or even social worker.

Aside from his high school diploma and a couple of years studying automobiles, his only certificate is from the school of hard knocks. But he's spun that into a part-time business: Street Smart Counselling.

"I don't claim to be a physician and I don't know much about the science. I just know what's worked for me and a handful of others."

He understands what addicted youths have gone through, and has perhaps more apparent credibility than a dapper professional in a tastefully decorated office.

"It doesn't matter if that professional counsellor is cor-

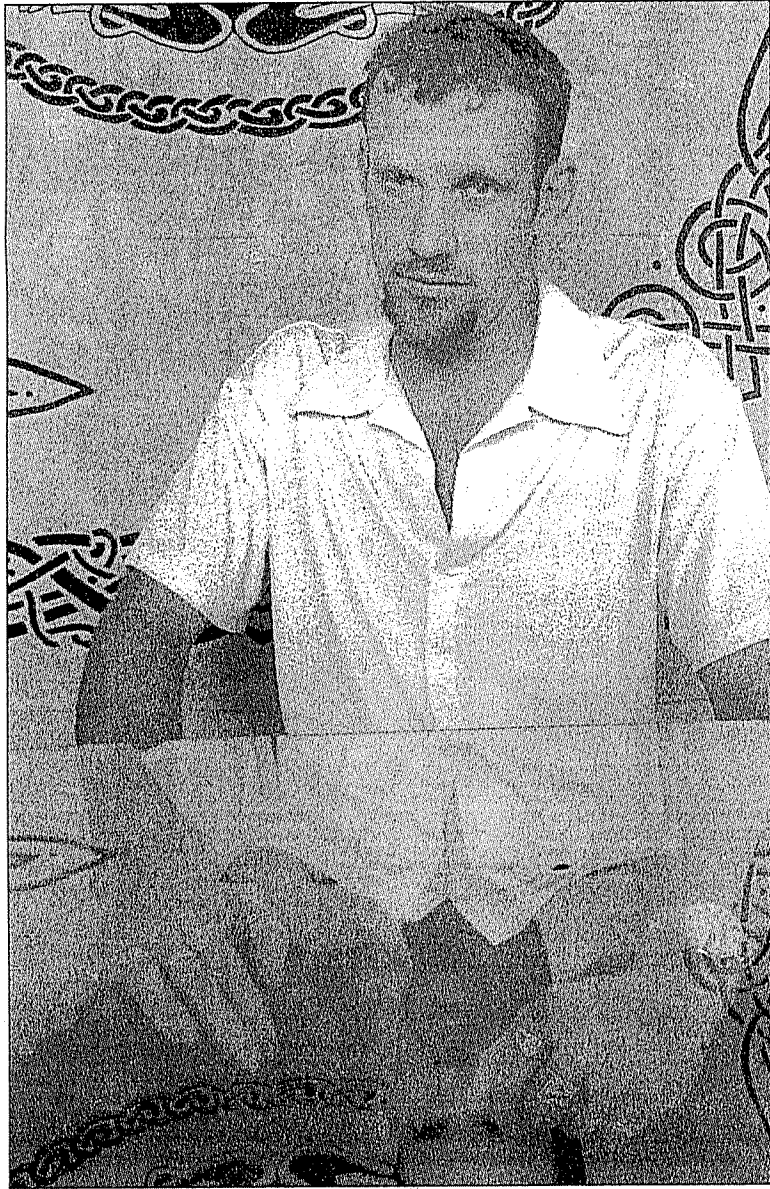


Photo by CARL HAHN/LIFE staff

Tom Barthel doesn't enjoy reflecting on his dark past as a drug addict and pusher, but he relies on that experience to help families dealing with drug addiction and mental illness. A volunteer with local support groups, Barthel is turning his work into a business, Street Smart Counselling.

rect; (the youth) can't relate, so they don't care," he says.

And when he talks, parents listen.

"He's put a lot of things into perspective for us parents," says Bonnie, whose last name was withheld to protect her family. "I definitely value him coming to our meetings."

Born and raised in Red Deer, Barthel was living on the straight and narrow as a high school student. But something was wrong.

"I didn't know why life was-

n't fun for me."

He had low self-esteem, and didn't interact well with other people. But when he started hanging around with "well-known, underaged criminals," he finally had a sense of belonging.

"These people were very open, very welcome, and had a thrill for life," he says. "And it was then that I discovered I had a thrill for life, too."

At 16 he dropped out of the international baccalaureate program and stopped doing

homework, still coasting to an 80 per cent average through the rest of high school. He wouldn't go to the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology for another year, however, because being 18 and legal was too big of a temptation.

"We hit the bars, . . . drove vehicles in the most irresponsible fashion possible."

After a year Barthel burned out and went to SAIT. He did extremely well, returned to Red Deer and got his first job.

Less than a month later he was fired.

"It was the beginning of an attention-span problem that I had no idea was there."

He decided never to be an employee again.

"I would never put myself in a position to feel that awful."

Barthel started selling pot small-time, but demand led him and some associates to develop a thriving dial-a-dope business. Young people became regular clients, and the sudden influx of money led him to consume more and more drugs: pot, some cocaine, a lot of ecstasy when it was trendy, then back to cocaine and crack.

He was never caught and never charged, although business was occasionally interrupted. But his cocaine use continued, leading him into what he calls a "deep schizophrenic psychosis."

At that point the dealing and drugs ended, as did all normal life functions. He even made one feeble attempt at suicide, but stopped part way through — a message to himself that it was time for change.

Barthel saw a psychologist who told him he suffered to some degree from several mental illnesses, but steered him away from psychiatric drugs, and onto holistic remedies that have been effective. Barthel also began relying heavily on several 12-step programs to help him battle his addictions.

Oddly, it was a seminar on the psychology of wealth that helped him turn the corner. The seminar taught people how changing their own attitudes toward themselves could make them wealthy — that

simply accepting who they are would never allow them to get ahead.

He took that lesson and applied it to his own addictions, hyperactivity, obsession and compulsion. Rather than accept his limitations, he determined to change what he could and make the rest work for him rather than against him.

"I knew a person's psychology is nothing they have to accept for what it is."

Barthel turned his obsessiveness and hyperactivity on work, putting in 80-hour weeks between several jobs. The primary one was roofing, which not only paid for his condo and the renovations to his "personal palace," but gave him a comfortable place to exist.

"It's roofing. You're not alone if you're there with an addiction problem or any kind of a mental health problem."

He's turned himself into what he considers a role model for addicted youngsters, to show them what the future can be like. A men's group he joined pressed him to act on his desire to become a public speaker, so he started volunteering with ReNew Hope and Parents Empowering Parents, a similar group, to start bridging the gap between parents and their addicted children. Understanding doesn't end the problems, but it does relieve a lot of the stress.

Bonnie agrees they now understand better what has been happening with their children.

"He definitely shed some light on all of that for us."

Barthel is prepared to encounter problems that are beyond his grasp, and will make referrals to therapists, counsellors or 12-step programs as he sees fit. But he hopes to give youths the motivation and confidence to play a role in their own recovery.

He realizes there may be some backlash as more people learn about his background, but it's a sacrifice he's willing to make.

"There's no way I can be who I want to be and hide that information," he says. "What happens, happens."

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

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