

## Providence Project – 12<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Re-union

On Sunday the 14<sup>th</sup> Sept 2008 I was invited to Bournemouth to attend the Providence Project's 12<sup>th</sup> Anniversary re-union by founder Steve Spiegel. 250+ other people were there to celebrate the ongoing success of this simple, cost effective but amazing programme. On the day 200 people signed the visitor's book and between them they had a startling 300 years (approx) of "clean time" (not including staff).

In many ways, the Providence Project (or the Provi as it's affectionately known), is bucking the current treatment trend. Today, the majority of drug users can expect several years of methadone maintenance before they are considered 'ready' for or get access to a residential treatment option

Just four years ago the provi had a private intake of clients which amounted to about 5% of its annual case load. Today the private intake is 60% and rising. More and more ordinary people, of modest means are dipping into savings or borrowing money in order to pay for their loved ones to receive effective treatment.

How did we get to the point where we are spending more than ever on drug treatment and fewer and fewer people are getting better? It seems only celebrities get to go to rehab and everyone else (unless, increasingly, they take matters into their own hands) has a future, as Mark Easton puts it of, "methadone, wine and welfare".

How much methadone will it take to neutralise the whole drug using population into an inactive stupor that brings crime under control? Or should we be looking

to places like the provi to lead a revolution in drug treatment. Methadone clearly has its place in reducing the danger of illicit use and bringing drug users into the treatment system, but thereafter, should we not have a plan that helps get drug users 'clean', back into work or education and back in touch with real life?

Those I met at the re-union thought so and as the day unfolded I lost count of the number of people that had found a route out of addiction through this amazing little rehab in Bournemouth. All the stories had a similar theme

*i.e. a tale of drug and alcohol use and addiction that was dragging the person telling it down a well worn path of misery and destruction. The battle to get help in a treatment system that has all too often lost the aspiration to help drug users (addicts) out of addiction and back into life. Then they arrive at the Providence Project (an increasing number either sent by their employer or under their own steam). Once there each had a personal story of how they coped with the detox and the first faltering steps of a drug free life.*

Without exception each former resident was full of praise for the people (staff and other residents) and the place. Not one person said it was easy, some took more than one attempt to get out of a life fuelled by drugs and alcohol but without exception everyone there felt their life had improved significantly. They were in work or education, their family relationships had been restored, they had real life choices and seemed to relish the challenges ahead – in short, they had hope and looked at the future with real (and contagious) optimism rather than fear and trepidation.

Like a guy from Manchester that lived in a crack house and used heroin and crack cocaine (and anything else besides) every day for several years. He used to use his script (methadone prescription) to “get him out bed every day”. His script got him straight and meant he could face the day of continual criminal and drug using behaviour. For him, and by the way he is now training to be a

teacher, it wasn't just about the drugs, but about his behaviour. I guess he appeared in the NTA figures year on year as a success, living on methadone but still an addict and still committing crime. The provi helped remove the addiction and set about equipping him to address his behaviour.....

.....or the man I met that had used drugs for many years and came off at the provi, now running his own business and no longer living life in fear. As he put it, "living his dreams", sounds corny but in this case, wonderfully true.....

.....or the woman who watched her mother die an alcoholic and was living out the same future as her daughter looked on, helpless and desperate for her mum. She turned her life around at the provi and her daughter was there as her mum shared – loud and proud - on her 90<sup>th</sup> day of sobriety. Mother and daughter, reunited in life and hopeful about the future

Old, young, black, white, male, female, parents, singles, .....all sorts and all types all part of wider family of recovered / recovering people.....every single one in employment, education or training getting their lives back, restoring the lives of their families and contributing positively to society.....some came funded, some unfunded, a large number via private employers and a range of other sources

The experiences of many on the day were summed up in the following short poem by **Ross Cameron**, 34 yrs old and previously involved in a world of crime, drug dealing and addiction for the last 15 years. Ross completed the provi in February 2008, is drug and crime free, is able to be a father to his son and play a full part in family life again and has just started at University with the hope that he can build a future for himself and those he loves

*By working the program my soul I have found,  
I'm spiritually moving up to higher ground,*

*I've risen from the depths of despair,  
My passion for life now, nothing can compare,  
One thing is for sure, that I'm well aware,  
Without out his guidance I'll slip back down there,  
From lurking the shadows and creeping the night,  
I'm out of the darkness and into the light,  
The further I trudge, the shorter it seems,  
To fulfil all my goals, my hopes and my dreams.*

Following the informal time, lunch was served, in the fantastic and friendly Marsham Court Hotel. We then adjourned to a conference room, not for the usual dry annual report or update on the latest policy position but instead we received an inspirational set of real life accounts of lives restored and hope re-kindled, of families brought together and of new challenges being faced and conquered and every one an inspiration (some of which are outlined above). I found my self spell bound, clapping, smiling, crying and at one point was even a participant as Steve Spiegel did a roll call of “clean time”!! We rolled back from, in excess of 20 years (where I stood up to be acknowledged) to those that were 24hrs ‘clean’. Each was cheered and re-affirmed in their task of getting their lives back on track.

I must admit that as I drove home that evening, from Bournemouth to Henley-on-Thames I was inspired, elated, drained and at times a little angry. The inspiration, elation and even the feeling of being drained was fairly easy to reconcile, given the sort of day I had had, but the anger was a surprise. As I reflected on the day I found myself wondering why places like the provi were increasingly, the exception to the rule and not in the mainstream. Why did places like this not get assured state funding? Why are they getting an ever shrinking piece of the half billion pound govt. drugs budget?

Maybe the reason that re-offending rates relating to drug users are so awful is that all we are doing by providing methadone as the primary treatment for drug addiction is (as the person I met from Manchester put it) "*getting addicts out of bed in the morning*". Thereafter, once the methadone is administered drug users are then stable and able to continue with their addiction for the rest of the day (and the crime to fund illicit use).

When are we going to get seriously ambitious for drug users, are drug users a sort of lesser human that should be grateful for a life of continued state sponsored addiction? A life of substitute-prescribing by the health service and then unpaid work by the probation service, removing graffiti from the walls of our inner city housing estates.

I look back on my time as an addict. I was a no hoper, a "nare do well", but I got the chance to get into a rehab, to get my life back (and that was over 20 years ago when drug services operated on a shoe string and there was no real govt funding to speak of).

Why has policy led us so far up the garden path and so far away from a common sense approach? We have medicalised and demonised a whole generation of drug users and in doing so sold their families, their loved ones and society short.

People can (and do) get better, given the chance and at places like the provi they do it for only £350 per week. Surely it's better to spend that kind of money getting people off drugs than to spend half a billion putting off the evil day and compounding the problem in the longer term?

Steve Spiegel thinks so and is planning a bold next step. He has created a fundraising subsidiary charity to provide funding for those that need treatment in

his and other treatment centres in the South-west area so that if they don't get state funding they then don't have to take out loans to pay for their care.

It's a sensible move given the funding trends identified by the provi and knowing Steve it will be successful (he has a number of events already planned). The sad truth is that he shouldn't have to, funding for work such as this really is a no brainer

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