

'I was a normal kid,' says Meredith, reflecting on how wanting to be a 'cool kid' led her down lethal road of drug addiction

Written by Mike Pickford

Remember, no feeling is final and it's never too late to change your life.

Something of a cliché, but one Orangeville girl has used that very statement to quite literally come back from the dead. Or at least the walking dead. For reasons of anonymity, we will not be disclosing her identity. Instead, we will simply refer to her as Meredith. Here is her story.

Meredith always considered herself a happy-go-lucky kind of child. She breezed through life almost nonchalantly, doing well in school, excelling in sports and having absolutely no problem making friends. 'I was a normal kid; you know?' Meredith told this reporter. Then, at the age of 14, with the prospect of entering the big bad world of high school in Canada, things started to change. No more was Meredith simply content with playing hockey. She wasn't happy hanging around with all of her childhood friends. She had no interest in pushing herself academically. Her one and only concern was how she was going to push herself into the supposed upper echelon of teenager and be recognized as one of the 'cool kids'.

'I wanted nothing more than to be a part of that, to be one of the cool kids, to be accepted,' Meredith said.

And so her transition began.

It started with skipping the odd class here and there, so that the group could hang out, play pranks and, in Meredith's words, just enjoy each other's company without the constriction of a classroom and a teacher watching over them. But, as the pranks grew old and simply spending time with each other started to become a bore, one or two members of the group began to experiment.

First it was alcohol, then cigarettes. Before too long, almost every Grade 9 'cool kid' at Robert F. Hall Catholic Secondary School that year was cutting class and leaving school early to smoke marijuana. And so, the slippery slope began.

'It consumed my life. It was what I lived for, what got me up in the morning to go to school. I was always high,' Meredith said. 'All I thought about was 'it's just the beginning of high school, everyone screws up in Grade 9, it's not like I'm doing it alone. Everyone is doing it'.'

Before she could even blink, Grades 10 and 11 passed Meredith by in a blurry haze. Entering her senior year, after years of 'blazing up', Meredith found that bog standard weed didn't really do too much for her anymore. It took way too much alcohol for her to generate the buzz she was seeking. She yearned for something stronger and, on one fateful night that changed her life forever, she found it.

'I was at a party and some guy comes up to me and asks me if I want to do some lines of cocaine with him,' Meredith remembered. 'Alcohol running through my bloodstream, people waiting for my response, I say 'eff yeah, why not'? That was the first night in a long time I felt alive. That's also the night I decided that cocaine would become a daily thing for me.'

Substance abuse is no joke and, while there are some who choose to believe it's a problem reserved for large urban areas, like Toronto or Hamilton, the truth is that it's often communities just like Orangeville that are hit hardest.

Kristy Fearon is the addictions outreach counsellor at Orangeville's Family Transition Place (FTP). Since taking on the role in 2013, Ms. Fearon has helped hundreds of women in the area with her Mothers Changing Paths program. Originally designed to assist moms and pregnant women with opioid-specific addictions, the initiative has evolved in recent years to allow any woman over the age of 16 with a drug or alcohol dependency to seek help.

While a large majority of Kristy's cases involve women over the age of 25, she has noticed something of a spike in numbers recently for those still considered to be youth. She estimates that she's currently working with between five and 10 women between the age of 18 and 24. When quizzed on what it is exactly she does to help her clients deal with their substance abuse issues, Ms. Fearon says her program changes from case to case.

'We do trauma work, where I sit down with clients and we talk about their problems and try and get everything out on the table. We talk about mental health and, obviously, substance use and abuse and then it's just lot of day-to-day things, what they're doing, how their life is going,' Kristy said. 'At the end of the day, it's really whatever the client needs. It's a very woman-centred approach and it changes person to person. What works for one individual may not necessarily work for another.'

There has been a big demand for her services since she moved to the community from Brampton. In the 2015/16 year the Mothers Changing Paths program saw 65 unique women take part, with that number jumping to 80 in 2016/17. So far this year Kristy says she has had 43 new clients sign up.

'Our numbers are definitely rising. Substance abuse is definitely there,' Kristy said. 'I know there are a lot of people that believe this sort of stuff doesn't happen in Orangeville, or in Dufferin County but last year I saw 80 new women, to go along with the regular

clients I already had so obviously there is some concern here.?

She added, ?I think people are in denial if they don't think we have a substance abuse issue. Prior to working at FTP I worked in a clinic down in Brampton and we probably had a good 40 or 50 people regularly traveling down from Orangeville because we were the closest methadone clinic.?

A methadone clinic is a place where a person who is addicted to opioid-based drugs, such as heroin, fentanyl and other prescription painkillers, can receive medication-based therapy. Freedom Trail Addiction Clinic, located at 15 Brenda Boulevard, is Orangeville's only methadone and suboxone treatment facility.

Back to Meredith. After her first night fling with cocaine, she was hooked. Barely a night went by where she didn't prepare herself a line or two. While she was able to sustain her previous lifestyle that included daily use of marijuana, Meredith learned quickly that taking that next step came at a cost. And a big one at that.

As she searched for ways to finance her next fix, Meredith made perhaps her most dangerous choice of all. She decided that she would start dealing.

?Once I found out how easy it was to get money just by dealing drugs, I began to get myself deeper into the ?drug world',? Meredith said. ?A few months later I'm taking a look at my life. It's almost the end of Grade 12. I'm in a gang and I'm basically dealing every drug you can think of. But, I'm not happy.?

Depression soon set in as Meredith started to think about the years she had wasted trying to impress people she had no business trying to impress, drinking and smoking and lining up on a near daily basis. She started to think about the true friends she had shunned and subsequently lost. She was also beginning to realize that cocaine really wasn't doing enough for her anymore. With all those feelings bubbling under the surface, she did the only thing she knew how ? take more drugs.

Cocaine was mixed with alcohol ? beer, spirits, practically everything. Prescription medication such as Xanax was also introduced to her daily intake, as was ?lean', the street name for liquid codeine. Still, with the dangerous cocktail of drugs floating through her system on a daily basis, Meredith was not happy.

?It felt like I was on pause, but the whole world was still going on without me. Some of my old friends were going to college and university and here I was plastered in a garage with the people I thought were the ?cool kids',? Meredith said.

She had yet to truly hit rock bottom.

As her problems and emotions piled up, Meredith became a self-described party girl. She was out almost every night drinking and doing drugs. She became a walking, talking meme amongst the group of people she associated with, who chose to laugh and make fun of her deteriorating condition rather than reach out and help.

?They would just stand by, watch and laugh as I drank myself into oblivion,? Meredith said. ?Looking back now, it's silly. They weren't my friends at all.?

Embroided in this routine of drinking and partying, Meredith started to forget the things she had done the night before. She had almost developed the ability to blackout on demand after a few drinks ? almost as if she didn't want to know what was going on around her. That, however, would bring about horrible consequences as Meredith recalls she was raped not once, not twice, but three times over the course of just a few months.

She turned to her friends for help, but they didn't offer any. Instead, they teased Meredith, saying she deserved it for getting herself in such a state. With her self-esteem at an all-time low, Meredith says she started to believe them. Then, she was raped for a fourth time.

This time, things were different, Meredith recalled. She believes she was drugged. She was taken out to a dark, empty field beside a nearby party. Once it was all over, she was left there naked and completely incoherent as the drugs numbed her mind and her senses. A few weeks later, Meredith discovered she was pregnant. Not knowing what to do or where to turn, she exposed her unborn child to a deadly concoction of alcohol and drugs. She would miscarry just days later.

?I felt like a murderer,? Meredith said. ?Not a day goes by where I think about what could have been. Would my baby have been a boy or a girl? Would it have my eyes? Or my nose??

With guilt now added to her consistent feeling of worthlessness, Meredith jumped both feet first back into her life of partying. The guilt was too hard for her to handle. She hated herself and so she continued to waste her life away until it very nearly did waste away one night in May of last year.

Following a day of heavy boozing and drug use, Meredith and a collection of friends were gathered in a living room of one of their parents' houses. While her friends focused on themselves, Meredith was sprawled across a couch, on . She had overdosed. If it wasn't for one of her friends' mom coming home and finding the group, Meredith likely would not be here today to share her story. ?That was it for me. That was the breaking point. That's where I knew I had to turn my life around,? Meredith remembers.

She was rushed to hospital. One thing Meredith had done very well up until this point was hiding her secret life from her family. Now, they were about to learn the truth. Meredith was terrified of what their response would be, but, when she looked up from her hospital bed, she saw a mother in floods of tears, a father shaking uncontrollably. They weren't angry, they were only concerned for their daughter's wellbeing.

That concern helped to steer Meredith in the right direction. While she was a little hesitant at first, she enrolled in a three-month rehabilitation program at the Dave Smith Youth Treatment Centre (DSYTC) in Carp, just west of Ottawa. In what was her first of two stints, Meredith wasn't interested in bonding with the other girls at the facility, simply concentrating on finishing up and getting home. She graduated and returned home to Orangeville but, just a few months later, she relapsed and found herself back at the facility.

She approached this second chance differently. She engaged with the other girls at the centre, participated in the daily programs and shared her experiences in group sessions. She readily admits today that the treatment centre saved her life.

With three locations in the Ottawa region, the centre has become one of the most renowned and well-respected treatment facilities in the province since its opening in 1993. Originally a day treatment program, DSYTC became a residential program in 2010. Mike Beauchesne, Executive Director of the centre, spoke with the Citizen earlier this month to explain how his facility works.

"There are multiple components of our programming, the two main ones being our residential phase and our aftercare phase," Mr. Beauchesne said. "Our job is to help youth who come to us for help find a better version of themselves. We want to help these kids get their life back on track."

Mr. Beauchesne said the centre will see anywhere from 125 to 150 youth every year, while its staff will engage with approximately 200 caregivers/parents in its residential and aftercare programs in an attempt to help youth first defeat and then control their demons. Publicly funded by the provincial government, the centre has seen a steady increase in enrollment in recent years. Wait times for a spot in the program, according to Mr. Beauchesne, average about 23 days.

"If we look back from, say, 2010 and the period from then until now then the number of individuals seeking services has certainly increased. In addition to that, the complexity of individuals seeking care has increased - we're seeing very significant addiction issues, some of which include multiple substances today," Mr. Beauchesne said.

"It's very concerning to me when you look at addiction amongst Ontario's youth. The situation is getting worse, not better. We all have a role and a responsibility to address this issue - it's something that, when you look at it, affects us all in one way, shape or form," he added.

According to statistics compiled by the facility, 93 percent of its clients reported feeling safe while engaged in its residential treatment program, while 93 percent would recommend DSYTC to a friend in need. Mr. Beauchesne boasted that clients noted a 44 percent drop in substance use and a 51 percent drop in mental health issues.

Meredith is one of the facility's biggest supporters. "Thanks to Dave Smith Youth Treatment Centre, I'm realizing the potential I have and the woman I can become," Meredith said.

Now, eight months sober, Meredith is ready to get her life back on track. She has enrolled at Humber College and will begin classes next week. She hopes to become an addictions counsellor, so that she can help steer youth away from the problems that plagued her teenaged years.

"Being an addict does not define who I am. I've been sober for eight months now and this is just the beginning of my sobriety. I've never felt more alive or as happy as I do right now," Meredith said. "I'm not saying it's going to be easy to stay sober, but that's just life. Life is a roller-coaster and I'm confident that I'm ready to deal with whatever it throws at me."

"I'm so thankful to my family and to the friends who stood by me through everything. I wouldn't have been able to come back without all of their love and support," she added.

It takes a great deal of bravery to come forward and speak so candidly about mistakes made earlier in life. For that, the Citizen thanks Meredith for sharing her story. Her motives are simple - she wants to let people know, no matter how bad the situation may seem, that there's always a way back in life.

"No matter how bad you think you have it, or how trapped you may feel, just know there's always a way out. There's always somebody there for you, waiting to lend a helping hand, you just have to be ready and willing to take the leap," Meredith said.

"Everything happens for a reason. Had it not been for my overdose, I wouldn't have gone to the hospital and my parents wouldn't have found out about my addiction. I wouldn't have gone to the Dave Smith Youth Treatment Centre. Things happen, opportunities come up, you just have to be willing to take them."

Today is International Overdose Awareness Day. Family Transition Place, in partnership with other community agencies, will be hosting a first-ever International Overdose Awareness Day Fair at the Edelbrock Centre from 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. For more

information on the event, visit www.overdoseday.com.