

A graduate rebuilds his pride, his life, his relationships

By Kelly Egan, Ottawa Citizen December 14, 2012



Photograph by: Wayne Cuddington , Ottawa Citizen

Steve Emmons, 50, is a former member of the armed forces who fell prey to addiction and hard times. He cleaned up at the Ottawa Mission and graduated from their food services program.

He has one of those rubbery, expressive faces, as though the dent of experience overly stretched him, in good ways and in bad. And it is so.

Steve Emmons, 50, barely able to sleep the night before, nervously rose to speak at his graduation on Thursday, not being accustomed to podiums or personal laurels.

“It’s hard for me to feel proud of myself,” he told 30 people in the chapel of the Ottawa Mission, neatly decked out in a chef’s black-and-whites. “But today I do feel proud.”

Few events in this city have the poignancy of these “graduation” ceremonies at the Waller Street Mission, where, on occasion, shattered human beings celebrate the slow work of being put back together — and vow to try anew.

Emmons was one of three graduates from the Food Services Training Program, where he spent five months learning the basics of working in a large-scale, commercial kitchen. This followed a five-month stay in the Mission’s LifeHouse, a residential rehab program that is probably the longest, most intensive in the city.

He’s headed to Algonquin College’s culinary program in September. Thus is it a long road back.

“There’s no way to repay you,” said an overcome Emmons, “except to keep going.”

After a 17-year career in the military, Emmons was a functioning alcoholic. Then crack cocaine came along.

“You can’t even explain what it does to you,” he said after the short ceremony. “It’s the one drug you use that you just want more, more, more.”

His marriage broke up. He wore out the goodwill of parents and relatives. He lost contact with his two children, now adults.

“All I cared about, all the drug let me care about, was crack cocaine. And it was always ‘last time, last time, last time’.”

He was a step or two from living on the street. Though he had an armed forces pension, drug money was a constant problem.

“My money would go in the bank at one in the morning and I’d be phoning to see if it was there so I could buy more crack.”

He tried rehab, but typical 30-day programs didn’t seem to work. “I had a death wish; I seriously had a death wish. I’d given up.”

For the first time in 12 years, he’ll be spending Christmas with his children after rebuilding the relationship during the past 18 months. He plans to travel to New Liskeard, Ont., and spend about 10 days with his daughter Stefanie and grand-daughter Kasey, almost four.

Stefanie, 25, said that for several years she refused contact with her father because of his addiction and its associated wreckage, the most common one being, we hurt worst the ones we love best.

Why was it important to reconnect?

“I wanted my father back,” she said Friday. “When he was on the drugs and everything, he wasn’t my father. I didn’t know that man.”

She said he’s changed a great deal since he’s cleaned up, and she’s proud of his recovery. They’ve reconnected gradually: phone calls, texts, weekend visits to her home, now an extended stay together.

“My father knows that I forgive him. If I didn’t forgive him, we wouldn’t have the relationship we do now.”

It was important, too, she said, for her daughter to know her grandpa. “She thinks the sun and the moon rise with him.”

Emmons said his drinking began when he was 14 or 15. When he joined the forces on a whim at age 17, he said alcohol was quite prevalent in the military culture.

A supply technician, he worked in logistics most of his career, serving in Germany and the Middle East, while living for about nine years in Trenton.

A crisis sent him from the Royal Ottawa to the Civic campus, where psychiatric staff put him in touch with the Mission program. There, he was put into stabilization, while staff helped him sort out benefits available to him at Veterans Affairs.

Indeed, if he stays clean, the department will fund his two-year college program at Algonquin. He'd like to come back and work at the Mission.

He was asked about the most valuable thing he learned during rehab there. He paused for a moment, and broke out in an exaggerated frown.

"That I'm worth something."

Emmons, too, would like the world to know that the Mission is not just a shelter and a bunch of free meals. So much more goes on behind those brick walls.

Board member Jack Murta, past-president, an ex-MP, spoke but briefly at the ceremony. He had volunteered in the kitchen with the graduates and wished them well. He turned, faced them, and pinned the essence of the afternoon.

"This is the reason we're all here."