

# ‘They rebuilt me’

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*Louis D. celebrates his graduation from one of the stages of the Ottawa Mission’s addiction services programs on April 9.*

When Louis D. was first brought to the Ottawa Mission, he was a broken man.

He had been living in a tent in the bush near the Experimental Farm for six weeks and was addicted to crack cocaine.

Louis, who asked that his last name not be used, is one of dozens of homeless men that has gone through the Ottawa Mission’s addiction services this year. A large group graduated from the program’s three different stages at a ceremony on April 9.

Louis’ journey at the mission started more than five months ago. He started living in the general population area, affectionately dubbed “the jungle” by its inhabitants.

Six weeks before he arrived at the mission, Louis had taken off on his own after his partner’s family had cast him off at Thanksgiving. He spiralled into a deep, lonely existence of drug abuse until his partner found him living in his tent and promised to get him help if he would stay away from drugs and alcohol.

She took him the Civic Hospital and then to the mission.

Within three weeks of being in the jungle, and attending daily group counselling sessions in the mission’s day program, Louis was offered a spot in the stabilization program. In stabilization, participants abstain from alcohol and drugs and live in rooms separate from the general shelter population for 30 to 40 days, depending on their needs. They go through intensive one-on-one sessions with counsellors, who guide them through their problems and their trauma.

“Without the help from here, it’s a one way road out, and I’m not taking that road,” Louis said.

He was diagnosed with cancer in his right shoulder a few months into the second program, but had a successful operation to remove the tumor.

He has been through rehab programs before, but said coming so close to death is what makes his recent stint different.

“I thought my life was over,” he said. “I’ve been given the opportunity to live life cancer-free. What more could you ask for?”

Louis has now graduated from stabilization and is currently in the last stage of the program, called Lifehouse. This last stage is a five-month intensive program in which participants live in their own rooms in a building beside the main shelter.

Participants are gradually reintroduced to the community and to working or volunteering.

In addition to the help they get from counsellors and staff, the men in the program gain strength from each other. They share a special bond and sense of community, helping each other in their struggles.

“A lot of the times we come to a conclusion and you walk away from the table feeling much better about yourself,” Louis said of therapeutic sessions. “The support from each one is different, but you get something from everybody.”

Louis first arrived at the jungle wearing nothing but a pair of long johns, shoes and a T-shirt. He had broken glasses and had trouble hearing. He strolled through the Lifehouse complex on the day of his graduation from stabilization wearing a collared shirt, tie and vest, with new glasses and a pair of hearing aids given to him by the mission.

“They rebuilt me,” he said.

More than 70 people graduated from the stabilization program in 2014 and 22 completed the Lifehouse program. The mission continues to offer support to anyone who has graduated from Lifehouse and still needs counselling.

The shelter operates two second-step homes in the city for a total of 11 men to continue counselling services after they complete an addiction treatment program.

For Louis and so many of the men who have poured through the shelter’s doors, their journey through its addiction services programs have given them another chance.

“I’m a clean person now, in more than one way,” he said.