

Anika Cornish

UGM Offers a Second Chance at Life



Morning comes early for the men and women who live on the streets of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

With the city's cool, wet weather and the sometimes hostile climate of street life, getting a good night's sleep on the streets can be challenging. In need of something to eat and a proper bathroom, each morning hundreds of people walk through the doors of Union Gospel Mission's Vancouver Drop-in Centre.



John hosts guests at UGM's Western-themed Summer Barbeque this August

Although some come simply to avail themselves of the basics offered at this East Hastings Street facility, many return because they have found a place that offers support, encouragement, and—most important—a way out.

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Working on the frontlines of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside takes a special kind of person. Outreach workers at Union Gospel Mission (UGM) genuinely care about the people they serve. By treating each individual with the dignity every human deserves, outreach workers like Johnny remind people living on the streets that they are valued and loved—each life has meaning and it's never too late to start fresh.

And Johnny would know. Before he came through the doors of UGM, he struggled for 20 years with drug and alcohol issues. Though he never lived on the streets, for years Johnny was in constant transition and had nowhere to call home.

One evening Johnny shared his struggles with a friend who knew about UGM's Alcohol and Drug Recovery Program. "You need to go see Maurice," the friend said,

speaking of UGM's longtime president Maurice McElrea.

In 2003 Johnny entered UGM's live-in recovery program. During this time he also made use of UGM's Education and Employment Services. An employment assessment showed that Johnny was best-suited for work focusing on interpersonal relations. Once finished the recovery program, he proceeded with a plan to start a landscaping business to pay off his debts.

The stress of managing a business and his dislike for the type of work he was doing left him feeling unfulfilled and anxious. He went back to using alcohol to deal with his stress and mask his pain.

Johnny was sinking into the deepest despair he had ever known. Feeling lost and hopeless, he decided to "disappear." Though he wanted to end his life, he says he probably "didn't have the guts." On his way out of town,



Union Gospel Mission's Vancouver Drop-in at daybreak



Welcoming guests to the UGM chapel before the meal service

something made him walk past UGM. An employee recognized Johnny on the street and asked him to consider entering the recovery program again.

“At that time, recovery was the furthest thing from my mind. I believed I had crossed a line with God and that I was beyond His mercy and forgiveness.” While speaking with

the outreach worker, Johnny had a moment of clarity—what he calls “divine inspiration”—and he committed himself to recovery for a second time.

That was 2004. This time Johnny decided to give his recovery and his heart to God. That was the turning point. “What I have been taught at UGM and what I have seen working in other people’s lives is real,” he says. Having experienced a true transformation in recovery—physically, emotionally, and spiritually—Johnny decided to make use of his aptitude and desire for working with people.

Once he completed the Alcohol and Drug Recovery Program, Johnny volunteered as a mentor for other men in the program. In 2006 he was accepted for an internship at UGM. In 2007 he started working at the Vancouver Drop-in, instilling hope in the lives of so many men and women and encouraging them to seek a second chance at life.



Union Gospel Mission is an urban relief organization based in Vancouver’s

Downtown Eastside. With 12 locations between Vancouver and the city of Mission, UGM is ideally positioned to help those who need it most.

UGM offers myriad life-changing programs and services—meals, chaplaincy, drop-in, family services, outreach, alcohol and drug recovery, employment, and education services. It gives hope and help to create brighter futures for men, women, youth, and children in our communities.

The programs are entirely donor-funded and rely on the generosity of people such as the BC Notaries’ Vancouver Chapter, who in March raised \$1735 to support the good work of UGM. To learn more about how you can make a difference, please visit our Website. ▲

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