



Help for abused boys who become men

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Don. W. started drinking when he was 13 to numb the pain he felt from years of bullying and sexual, physical and mental abuse.

The Keremeos man remained an alcoholic for much of his life, until at age 53, he realized he wanted to re-discover who he was.

A big part of finding himself was getting counselling through the South Okanagan Victim Assistance Society, SOVAS. Now the men's counselling program, which turned his life around, is facing financial challenges due to cutbacks in fundraising money.

"This program saved my life by giving me tools to cope that I can use as a crutch instead of alcohol and to help me understand what happened to me," he said. SOVAS, located in an office on Martin Street in Penticton, provides counselling, court support and information to men, women and children who have experienced abuse.

The men's program has been around for four years and offers services to adult men who have experienced childhood abuse, sexual assault and relationship violence. Initially it was offered for eight hours a week, but that was expanded to 12 hours a week two years ago thanks to funding from the Gaming Commission, the United Way, the **Health Sciences Association** and its own fundraising initiatives.

The current shortfall is in money from fundraising, which means at the beginning of April, SOVAS will have to cut the program back to eight hours again. That means there will be less appointments available and the number of men on the waiting list, now 6 or 7, would grow.

"This is heartbreaking to me, there is such a wide range of men, from those admitting for the first time they have been sexually abused to older men in their 50s and 60s who have struggled for years," said Anne Reinders, counsellor for the program.

Statistics provided by SOVAS state one in six men experience unwanted or abusive sexual experiences before age 16 and this can have lasting negative effects. Men who have had such experiences are at much greater risk for mental health problems such as depression, alcoholism and drug abuse, suicide attempts and problems with intimate relationships. A major part of the problem, said Reinders, is men tend to bury their emotions which only increases their isolation, shame and horror about what happened to them.

The clients she sees, ranging in age from 19 to their 70s, are initially shy and have trust issues. But over time she sees them open up and really start to do the work they need to do. "It's about who I am now and how do I become the kind of man I want to be," she said. "And I do see success, men starting to turn their lives around."

Her hope is that corporations or individuals come forward with sustainable funding to keep the men's program going. Don W. hopes it will remain at 12 hours and grow in the future to support men in need. "Men are not allowed to cry, we are supposed to be tough, but we need help just as much as anyone else," he said. "So it's important this program remains intact, because I know there are more men out there like myself."

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