



Michael's Story

From Rock Bottom to Redemption

Michael Cleary and CCH's Francine Fitzsimmons

“They say you hit rock bottom when the last thing you lose is the most important to you. My rock bottom was losing my family.”

Michael Cleary went from being a proud father and successful business owner to living alone in Cornwall, on welfare and in treatment for depression, anxiety and substance abuse.

From the outside looking in, Michael was a high functioning member of society; but what people couldn't see was how years of managing his emotions with prescription drugs and alcohol took its toll. The cycle started when Michael was young, struggling with anxiety in school and panic attacks as a teen. A prescription for anti-anxiety medication was administered, but things took a turn when he discovered alcohol.

“When I found alcohol I was strong as a rock.” With a newfound coping mechanism, Michael felt like a better version of himself, not realizing his actions would eventually jeopardize all he held dear.

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As time passed, his attempts to cope turned problematic. “Monday morning would roll around and I wouldn’t feel well, so I’d need more pills to counteract the alcohol. Eventually, my life became a revolving mess. People around me could see it, but I couldn’t.”

As Michael spun into darkness, he lost everything: his business, his home, his marriage, and his children. “I would have done anything to be with my kids. That first year I sobered up in August and by Christmas I wanted to die.” Instead, Michael embarked on a journey of sobriety that would last 19 years.

A marathon of hope

Working closely with a psychiatrist at CCH, Michael met an addiction therapist, Francine Fitzsimmons, to whom he credits much of his success. In addition to professional services, Michael also began a twelve step program that provided support outside of clinical hours.

“My recovery was three-pronged, to address the different issues I was experiencing. For the first few years, all I could focus on were my appointments so I took a job delivering pizza for \$5 an hour.

I wondered: how had this become my life? I am so grateful to Francine for the time she spent with me. No matter the situation, her door was always open and over the years I’ve continued checking in so I don’t relapse.”

Michael came to CCH because he had nowhere else to go; but after years of hard work and determination, he’s now helping others in our community find a new lease on life. Today Michael works as an Addiction Counsellor at CCH’s *St. Denis Centre* for men who struggle with drug and alcohol addiction. Michael is also a full time Counsellor for individuals with developmental disabilities at *Open Hands* in Cornwall.

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“Years ago, my psychiatrist told me, *It’s a marathon, Mike, not a sprint.* When I wake up in the morning I don’t regret anything I’ve been through. Honestly, it’s been an amazing journey.”

A few words from Francine ...

Mike’s story is an important reminder that many people in mainstream society don’t fit the picture of what we perceive to be someone with mental health or addiction issues. Mike’s family looked like any other. He went to college and was successful in his career, but used drugs and alcohol to control his anxiety. Eventually he needed more and more; then things spiralled out of control.”

“I’m proud to be a part of Mike’s story – but you know what? He did all the work, I just supported his journey. I always encourage my staff to do what’s needed to help their clients; even if it’s as simple as a five minute call once a day for a period of time to check in.”

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You may know someone like Michael

For those struggling in silence, there’s help right here at home. That’s why our team at Cornwall Community Hospital Foundation is proud to fundraise for our new Community Addiction and Mental Health Centre. Thanks to donors like you, we’re halfway to our \$1.2 million goal. Please give today; your donation will help someone like Mike start their journey to sobriety.