

Andy's story



At 21, Andy was a retail manager earning £36,000 a year with no history of drug use. One stupid decision to experiment changed everything dramatically. BCHA helped Andy break the cycle of homelessness, drugs and crime. Now he's looking forward to a new stage of life.

At 21, I was a supermarket manager earning £36,000 a year. Sure, I'd have a drink – but I'd never been into drugs. I remember vividly the Saturday afternoon when I was offered cocaine – crack cocaine – by someone I knew. I made a stupid decision. I had one pipe – and that was it; I was hooked. Over the next 12 months, I ran up £50,000 on credit cards, I got late on mortgage repayments – I even spent all the money my girlfriend had saved for Christmas presents.

In the end, my boss confronted me about drugs and I had to leave my job. I moved back to my parents and actually managed to get off the crack – but not for long. Then, one weekend, when there wasn't any crack, I had heroin instead – and that's when the crime started.

I was caught in a circle of using drugs, committing crime, going to prison, being back on the streets, using drugs again and so on. For years I was homeless, using drugs and drinking. As my prison sentences were quite short – just weeks at a time for shoplifting – I would do the detox inside but that would be it. There was no plan for outside of prison. With nowhere to stay, I slept anywhere – cars, carparks, the beach, communal areas of houses I broke into. Loads of times, I woke up surrounded by foil and cans with the police standing over me. I must have seemed quite frightening to people that saw me although I didn't realize it at the time.

I spent many nights at St Paul's hostel – in fact, I stayed there the very first week it opened in 2002. It was clean and safe, and somewhere to get my head down. And I was a regular at the day centre. But, I've got to be honest, my behaviour wasn't always acceptable, so there were many times I was not allowed to go in.

Things started changing when I started a methadone programme. As soon as I started it, I came off the heroin. The downside was my drinking got out of control. Later that year, I got double pneumonia. I was on the streets drinking myself to death because I couldn't breathe. I realized I didn't want to die before I was 40.

The staff at St Paul's never gave up on me. And when I wanted to get into supported accommodation at Lansdowne Gardens, they encouraged me to prove myself.

It hasn't been easy. I'd stopped taking drugs and drinking loads of times before but always started again. With BCHA it was different. The staff go beyond the job description to help – they take time out to give extra support. They've helped me learn new life skills, new coping skills – what you need to get you through a bad time. If it wasn't for BCHA, I don't know where I'd be. They got me to where I am now.

I think there are four stages to my life: my childhood, my teenage years, my drugs life and now, my next life. The circle of my new life is only half complete. Now I'm onto my education. I've done courses like goal setting, volunteering and mentoring, a 24-week counseling course, word processing and computer courses.

And I've done a lot of volunteering and I'm involved with SURF. I'm also doing a report that I hope will change perceptions about methadone and what people can achieve on it – I know because it's completely changed my life. Now I want to use my experience to help others and put something back. My motivation is really up – and now my main weakness is being impatient and wanting to get on with things too quickly.