

Chabad addiction program has a home of its own

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Staff Reporter

"R.," a man in his early 50s, is talking about how he took his first illicit drug—LSD—at age 12. He was a self-described Jewish kid from Côte St. Luc, and that kind of experimentation was not uncommon.

By 20, he was an addict, hooked on the more expensive cocaine. In his 30s he switched to the harder crack.

But R. was a "functioning addict"; he married, had three children and made good money, enough to buy a house in Hampstead. By outward appearances, they were a normal family.

However, he put drugs ahead of everything else, including his family, which he would eventually walk away from. He remarried and had another child, but continued to feed his addiction.

After a home robbery, the authorities realized this was not the ideal environment for an 11-year-old girl, and his daughter was taken away from him for some months. Soon after, he went broke.

This was R.'s rock bottom. After 31 years of addiction and spending, he estimates, in excess of a million dollars on drugs, he finally accepted he needed help.

His parents suggested Project Pride, an addictions crisis intervention and counseling program run by Chabad Lubavitch. He

was skeptical about going to a rabbi with his problem, and admitted he at first hated its director, Rabbi Benyamin Bresinger, for not even giving him a cigarette when he showed up at Pride's premises on Queen Mary Road.

Today R. credits the rabbi with leading him to a drug-free life and re-establishing his relationship with his children. He has not taken narcotics in two years, and not so much as an alcoholic drink, sleeping pill or any legal mind-altering substance in 13 months. R. does still smoke, but he can afford his own cigarettes again.

R. was sharing his story at a weekly open meeting at the new home of Chabad Lifeline (formerly Project Pride). In its 22nd year, the program has expanded and entered its most established phase with the move into a gracious 90-year-old two-storey house, owned by the Jewish General Hospital (JGH). It's a huge improvement over the cramped storefront walkup Project Pride rented and, though not officially affiliated, the confidence the JGH has shown has only enhanced the program's credibility.

The building, at 4615 Côte Ste. Catherine Rd., was the home of the hospital's first executive director Samuel Cohen from 1934 to 1967.

It's been mostly empty for years, and had fallen into disrepair.

Last May, Project Pride was notified that



Rabbi Benyamin Bresinger and his wife, Karen, run Chabad Lifeline, which has moved into new premises, the Samuel Cohen house owned by the Jewish General Hospital.

the Queen Mary building was to be demolished. Finding a new place would not be easy because rents are high in the area, said Rabbi Bresinger. "We never dreamed we could get a place like this," he said.

The work of Chabad Lifeline (the name has been changed with the move) was well-known to the JGH and other health-care institutions, and the match was made. Lifeline moved in Dec. 1.

The house has undergone tens of thousands of dollars of renovations to meet Lifeline's needs, most of it at the JGH's expense, and the JGH is charging is "very, very reasonable" rent.

The premises includes a large finished basement and spacious grounds that will benefit clients in the warmer weather.

Its vocation is discreet. The sign outside makes no mention of Lifeline's purpose, and the layout is such that one can enter by a side door and be seen in a counselor's office right at that entrance. "Anyone can come off the street and get immediate help," he said.

The weekly open meeting is a new program made possible with the more spacious, comfortable quarters. Anyone, including interested members of the public, can sit in and listen or contribute their own experiences, as long as everyone is on a first-name basis only.

Rabbi Bresinger explained that this openness is part of Lifeline's objective of raising awareness and overcoming the stigma associated with addiction.

"There's a lot of denial," he said, "and a lot of stereotypes. People think addicts must be in the gutter, but that's not usually the case. They come from all communities

and socio-economic groups."

Lifeline offers its services on a non-sectarian basis, essentially free of charge, with or without referral. It is not a detox or rehab program, but rather followup for those in recovery using the conventional 12-step approach. Addiction is viewed as a disease, not a moral failing. Rabbi Bresinger insists that there is never any attempt to introduce religion. "We have no agenda with anyone. We are here to help heal people. Period." A portrait of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Schneerson, who is credited with directing Chabad to work in this field, does hang in the reception area.

While substance abusers are the majority of its clients, Lifeline is also concerned with other addictions such as gambling or overeating. One of its staff, Jennifer Kotry, a certified sex-addiction therapist, is one of only two in Quebec. Also on staff is Donna Cohen, who is a specialist in those suffering from both addiction and a mental illness. Cohen has 30 years experience at the Montreal General Hospital. There are workshops in money management and for "co-dependent" women with unmet emotional needs.

Rabbi Bresinger, 45, a Chomedey native who joined the Lubavitch community as an adult, was a Chabad emissary in New Jersey for 17 years and worked with addicted people there for much of that time. His wife, Karen, Lifeline's clinical supervisor, has a master's degree in social work. She is the sister of Project Pride's founder in Montreal, Rabbi Ronnie Fine, who remains involved.

For information on Chabad Lifeline, call 738-7700 or visit www.chabadlifeline.com.