

# Chabad Lifeline expands its youth addiction services

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“Joe” began experimenting with drugs at age 11, and was soon addicted and in trouble. He was expelled from three schools, and was hospitalized after three overdoses.

Today, at 16, Joe has been clean for eight months and looks well. He credits an addiction support program with roots in the Lubavitch chassidic community for helping him get his life back on track.

Joe was referred to Chabad Lifeline by Barbara Levine, a teacher at Perspectives, a school under the English Montreal School Board for students who aren't succeeding in the regular system, located in St. Michel.

Both told their stories at the launch of Chabad Lifeline's new youth facility on Côte Ste. Catherine Road near the Jewish General Hospital (JGH).

The non-sectarian program is seeing an increasing number of teens aged 12 to 17 who have drug or alcohol problems, or who are negatively affected because of such abuse by their parents or older siblings, said director Rabbi Benjamin Bresinger.

Levine testified that Joe's success is not an isolated case. She has been sending students to Chabad Lifeline for years, and has always found the counselling and peer mentoring it provides to have helped them.

It's a service severely lacking in Quebec, especially in recent years with the health and social services cutbacks, she said.

“Some kind of magic goes on here,” Levine said. “No matter who I've brought here, it has worked out, even with kids who do not take well to adults.

“I've seen complete turnarounds of kids who were at the end of their rope.”

And there is no waiting – a youth in need is seen within days, she added.



Seen outside Chabad Lifeline's home are, from left, Rabbi Ronnie Fine, Rabbi Benjamin Bresinger, Karen Bresinger, Natalie Volland and Heleena and Eddie Wiltzer.

Chabad Lifeline receives no government funding and must privately raise its approximately \$450,000 annual budget. Almost all of its services are free.

Chabad Lifeline grew out of Project Pride, which was founded in 1989 by Rabbi Ronnie Fine, inspired by the Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Schneerson's directive to help heal whoever is in need.

The program entered a new, more professional phase 3-1/2 years ago with a move into its own premises and association with the JGH's Herzl Family Practice Centre.

It's located in what is known as the Samuel Cohen House, a gracious, more than 90-year-old two-storey cottage, on permanent loan from the JGH.

It has a professional clinical staff, supervised by Rabbi Bresinger's wife, Karen Bresinger, who has a master's degree in social work.

The youth facility is located in the basement, which was unfinished before the complete renovation.

Thanks largely to Heleena and Eddie Wiltzer, stalwarts of Chabad Lifeline, the necessary resources were raised, chiefly from brothers Ronald and Herbert Black of American Iron & Metal, the family of the late Edward Stern of Olymbec, and Natalie Volland of Gestion Immobilier Quo Vadis, to transform that space into a bright, comfortable set of rooms.

There's a lounge with kitchenette and TV, a games room with a ping pong table, and a treatment room. A youth services co-ordinator will soon be hired, Rabbi Bresinger said.

With its higher profile, Chabad Lifeline has been receiving an increasing number of referrals – from schools, CLSCs, psychologists, doctors and social service agencies.

Perhaps because of its JGH association, it is also seeing many more Jewish clients. “When we moved in, about 70 per cent were not Jewish,” Rabbi Bresinger said. “Today, that has almost reversed to about 65 per cent Jewish. There is less and less shame [about addiction]. Slowly, I think we are easing the stigma.

“About 10 per cent of the general population is afflicted by addictions. There is no reason to believe the figure is much different among Jews,” he said.

Chabad Lifeline is not a rehabilitation program. Rather, it is there for either those in crisis, who will be referred, or for those in recovery or trying to maintain a drug- or alcohol-free life.

It also runs groups for the families of addicts, and that's how Rabbi Bresinger realized just how many teens are “the innocent and often forgotten victims” in such situations. About 20 to 25 young people are seen monthly now, he said. He expects the number may triple by September.

“Nobody is looking after them,” he said. “These kids often don't realize they need help, [so] they are not sharing with anyone.”

He tells of one Jewish teen who was kicked out of school when he was caught selling water bottles filled with vodka.

“This was a very tough-looking kid with tattoos, but within an hour here, he was opening up,” Rabbi Bresinger said.

“He had a physically abusive father who had abandoned the family. The mother was depressed and didn't leave the house.

“After three months coming here, he seemed to be headed in the right direction, and has since graduated from high school.”

Although the program is rooted in chassidic Judaism, religion is not imposed on anyone. In fact, Chabad Lifeline's acceptance is probably due to the non-judgmental approach it takes, the rabbi said. ■

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