

They Are Homeless, Not Hopeless

“Life is like a heartbeat monitor. If there are curves on the line that means the heart is still beating, but if it is parallel or flat then there is no hope. Without the hardships, ups and downs, life will be just plain, flat. Those ups and downs are the reasons to keep you moving, to keep you motivated towards your goals.”

That’s a quote from Lily Aldren. If you ever go to the north shore of Kamloops, especially the North Shore exchange, it’s likely that you will see Aldren there. She’s a middle-aged woman in her early 30s. She’s often wandering around the Petro Canada station near the North Hills Shopping Mall. She is thin, a little chubby, she looks almost like a pear and stands around 5 feet 5 inches tall. Her face is oval shaped with sharp edges though and a wide forehead. She has noodle-like ash-brown hair. Her hair is a little messy, and the bottom of her hair is dyed to look like the colours of a setting sun. The most beautiful feature of Lily’s face is her eyes. Her hazel eyes can tell stories without even saying a word. Her name totally resonates with her blooming eyes.

Lily is a frontline street worker with the ASK Wellness Society. She has been working with the organization for almost about four years now. She is one of the best Naloxone experts at ASK.

Besides working as a street worker at ASK Wellness, Lily works as a line-prep cook at the Oriental Express restaurant on the North Shore. She lives with her two cats in a non-moveable RV truck somewhere near Ord Road. Living on the street for almost 15 years and then moved to her own home was quite a bit of change for her. “It was challenging for me at the beginning, I was scared of living alone, also to live around people too since I have trust issues

from my past”, says Lily. Hence, she chose the best companion to live with, Siero and Bat, her two cats.

This all stands in stark contrast to what Lily’s life was like a few years ago when she wound up on the doorstep of ASK Wellness. If anybody would have been asked her back then how life was going for her, she would have answered that she wanted nothing but to end her very much miserable life.

The issue of homelessness is a complicated one that is intertwined with a variety of other aspects of life, such as poverty, mental health, addiction, and the social stigma associated with it. It is a problem that can arise from a wide variety of circumstances and affects people from all walks of life. One or more of the following, including but not limited to: financial instability, domestic violence, substance abuse, and mental illness can lead to homelessness. Individuals who are experiencing homelessness frequently display remarkable resilience, perseverance, and strength despite the obstacles they face. Their experiences have the potential to enlighten us about the realities of homelessness and motivate us to act in order to assist vulnerable populations and address the underlying causes of homelessness.

Like many of the homeless people, Lily’s story is not simple, instead it is overly complicated. She was born in a financially unstable family. She had a very disturbing childhood. Her father was addicted to drugs and tortured her mom every single day. She watched her father stealing her mom’s money for drugs. There was always yelling, screaming, and crying in her house. Her mom was the only working individual in the household. Despite all the fighting and yelling at her father, Lily’s mom managed to take good care of her daughter while her father would never bother if his daughter was alive or dead. He would only come home to get drug’s money from her mom and create all the fuss.

“I think all those incidents made me a little bit more mature than my age,” Lily says reflecting on that time. “When I was only seven, I asked my mom why she stayed with my dad,” her face turned to look like a burning piece of coal as she remembered. She described how she felt safe and happy when it was just she and her mom in the house and her dad was not around. She wished it had always been that way. “Finally, that day came,” Lily says, her eyes now sparkling with joy. “One day mom just got a call from our local hospital that my dad had died from an overdose. I did not feel any sadness when I heard the news; instead, I was so relieved that my mom did not have to go through those terrible mental breakdowns anymore,” her cheeks were blushing again.

She hoped that was the end of all their struggles. But a year after her father’s death, her mom remarried. At first her stepdad was affectionate to her. But the devil was coming out of its wings once she stepped into her teen years. At that time, Lily’s mom was working as a caregiver at a senior’s home, and she often worked the night shift. Her stepdad seized that opportunity.

“Whenever mom was on a night shift, that animal would come to my room and rape me. I was just a sack of meat and bones to him nothing else,” Lily says. The memories of that time still bring her to tears. Her stepdad threatened Lily by saying that if she ever told her mom what was happening, he would throw Lily out of the house.

Reality becomes harder and bitter when you cannot foresee the truth. At 15 years old Lily got pregnant. Her mom found the pregnancy test kit while cleaning the washroom. “That was the first and last time she slapped me. She slapped me so hard that all her fingers were visible on my cheek,” Lily says. Her mom took her to the local hospital to have an abortion. Things only got worse from there. Shortly after getting the abortion, Lily’s worst nightmare

came true, and her life was turned upside down. The night she came home from the clinic, her mom committed suicide in their backyard.

“I lost the person who meant the entire world to me,” Lily starts sobbing. Soon after they found her mom, her stepdad just kicked her out of the house. “Can you believe I had to sneak in at my own mom’s funeral. Can you believe it?” Lily says. Her sobbing gets so loud as she relives that time in her life that it feels like everything will tear apart.

Lily left home when she was only 15 years old. She dropped out of school and began couch surfing at friends’ houses. That only lasted a couple of months until they too rejected her. And then the real struggle began. She started spending nights on streets.

For months on end, she was forced to spend the night wherever she could find a spot to lie down. Sometimes on parks benches, sometimes in front of gas stations or restaurants. She stole food, clothes, and did everything that she could possibly do to survive. At that point, all she had was a torn apart sweatshirt, pants, a jacket, and a blanket.

“I had nothing, no hopes, no motive to keep going. I lost count of how many times I thought about committing suicide!” Lily says and for the first time her voice sounds as heavy as thunder. “Though I quitted on life, life did not quit on me. That time it gifted me with a bunch of friends, and they took me in with them. A lot of kids at age 14 or 15 would think I would be living the best life not having to go to school and hanging out with my friends all day and partying all night,” Lily says.

It wasn’t a good life though and before Lily even knew it, she had gotten into street prostitution. She was only 16 and she was now also battling serious substance abuse. She put herself in horrifying situations and faced horrible things. She spent the next 10 years living on the streets, earning money from sex work and struggling with addiction.

“I needed money for my drugs. So, I traveled various cities and towns to earn more money from my fulltime prostitution job,” Lily says sarcastically. But life moved towards a positive direction when she came back to Kamloops again.

It was after she met some new friends living on Tranquille street that finally positive change started to happen. Despite being homeless, their life was not as miserable. That group of friends taught Lily that making someone else happy can also bring happiness. A person named Phillips used to come and meet the group every evening. Phillips is an active worker of ASK’s Maverick Supportive Recovery Program. He taught the group self-healing techniques. Phillips was the person who introduced Lily to ASK Wellness and changed her life for good.

“When I met her, she was in a bad condition,” Phillips remembers. He talks about how he doesn’t force anyone to use the shelter. He was able to convince Lily to speak with a counsellor and after her first two sessions, she came to the shelter by her own will. “Now look at her!” Phillips says, “She became an important member of the organization, has her own job, living at her place with her cats. She is amazing.”

Another person who knows Lily’s story is Lisa X, a board member of ASK Wellness. “Lily’s story and situation both were complicated when we met her,” Lisa says. She remembers that Lily was addicted to methamphetamine when she first came to ASK Wellness. Lisa credits the programs at ASK that targeted Lily’s specific needs and helped her to recover from her mental and physical trauma. “We were more than happy to help her get what she deserved,” says Lisa.

Before coming to ASK’s doorsteps, Lily had a best friend named Sarah Anne. Like Lily, “life had always been a struggle for me,” said Sarah. Growing up, she had to take care of her

younger siblings while her parents worked long hours to make ends meet. As a teenager, she dropped out of school to work full-time to help support her family.

When her parents passed away, Sarah found herself alone and struggling to meet their needs. Soon enough her aunt took her siblings into her home. "I worked multiple jobs, but it was never enough," she sighed. Eventually, she lost her apartment and at the age of 20 found herself living on the streets.

At first, Sarah was scared and alone. She had no one to turn to, and she didn't know how to survive on the streets. But she quickly learned to adapt, finding shelter in abandoned buildings, and begging for change on the streets.

Despite her circumstances, Sarah remained kind and compassionate. She often shared her food with other homeless people and volunteered at a local shelter when she had the time.

One night while sitting in front of a gas station, Sarah met young Lily. She learned about how Lily had run away from an abusive home and had nowhere to go. Sarah took her under her wing, showing her how to survive on the streets and offering her a sense of hope and comfort.

As the years went by, Sarah and Lily became like family. They would share their stories and dreams, talking about a better life beyond the streets.

Like Lily, her life also changed once she met Phillips. She also went to ASK's doorsteps and started doing the volunteer works for ASK. While doing that, Sarah found a job at COBS Bread, a bakery. She worked hard to save up money. After almost two years of work, she saved enough money to be able to afford rent in an apartment. And with the help of ASK's shelter program, she found a one-bedroom apartment at Tranquille. It wasn't much, but it was a start.

Despite her success, Sarah never forgot where she came from. She continued to volunteer at the shelter and help others in need. And she always remembered the lessons she learned while living on the streets - the importance of kindness, compassion, and never giving up hope.

"It all started with a dream and a little bit of kindness. And now, I'm able to help others achieve their dreams, too," she smiled and said.

Unlike Lily and Sarah, Jacob Jayme's story is a little bit different. He had lost his job, his family, and his home due to his addiction to drugs, and been homeless for eight years. He spent most of his days wandering the streets, searching for food and shelter. Jacob had given up hope that his life would ever get better. He felt invisible to the world, like no one cared about him or his struggles.

One cold winter evening, Jacob was sitting on a park bench, feeling defeated and hopeless, when a young woman named Emily approached him. She asked him if he was hungry and offered him a sandwich and a hot cup of coffee. Jacob was taken aback by her kindness. No one had ever shown him such compassion before.

To Jacob's surprise, Emily sat down next to him and wanted to listen to his life's story. Jacob hesitated at first, but something about Emily's kindness made him feel comfortable enough to share his story. "You know, I had been struggling with addiction since my teenage years, felt outcasted among my friends and family, and never thought anyone would be eager to listen to me," said Jacob while sighing. He told her about his struggles with addiction, and how he had lost everything that mattered to him.

Emily listened intently, without judgment, and told Jacob that she believed in him. "When I had given up on life, she told me that I am capable of turning my life around and that I deserve a second chance," said Jacob with a grateful smile on his face. Upon talking to her he

learned that Emily was also like Jacob, but she turned her life around and now she is working as a volunteer with ASK Wellness. She even helped him enroll in Maverick's program.

At first, Jacob was scared about being judged by the people of the homeless shelter. But he knew that this was his chance to turn his life around and he must bring his life back on track. "I stayed in the program for more than a year, went through counselling twice a day and came out clean," said Jacob.

After that Jacob started working as a housekeeper for ASK. On one fine fall afternoon, while sitting on the same park bench, he saw Emily approaching towards him with a pretty smile. She brought him a job application for a local restaurant. She told him the restaurant needed a dishwasher and thought he would be a perfect fit. He was hesitant at first, but Emily's encouragement gave her the strength to try.

He filled out the application and went to the restaurant for an interview. To his surprise, he got the job. He started working as a dishwasher, and slowly he was able to save enough money to rent a studio apartment.

Jacob couldn't believe how much his life had changed since he had met Emily. He had a job, a place to call home, and enough food to eat.

"After that I met her again on an evening of early December in 2019 at the same park where we first met," said Jacob with glowing eyes. "I don't know if I fell in love with her or not, but there was something for her." He ran up to her and hugged her tightly. He thanked her for believing in him and showing him kindness when he needed it most. Emily smiled and told him that he had done all the hard work, and that she was just happy to have been a small part of his journey.

From that day on, Jacob knew that he was no longer alone. He had found a friend, and someone who had shown him that there was hope for a better life.

“I still ran onto her sometimes while doing the volunteer works, but never could have explain her about my feeling, in case that ruins our friendship,” said Jacob with a gloomy face.

“Homeless people are still human. They are not some kind of alien or zombie. They are homeless because they do not have the money to afford a safe roof. They do not work because they cannot. Most of them have some kind of criminal history, either stealing or drugs or something. If you do not want to help them, that’s fine, but please do not give them the look that they are from outer space,” Lily says this with frustration. She knows how the street people feels. And that’s why she comes to the north shore exchange every day to show them the ways to create meaning to their own lives and to the society.

The hardships of street life are highlighted by these three accounts of the homeless population. They emphasize the hardships that the homeless face on a daily basis, such as the inability to obtain food and shelter. These accounts also highlight the significance of compassion, empathy, and community in assisting the homeless. Until we as a society have created a world in which everyone has access to safe and stable housing, the problem of homelessness will persist.