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'This is my shot': Landscaping work supports addictions recovery, rebuilding lives

Opened last year, Your Place hires graduates of New Roads Therapeutic Recovery Community who are motivated to change their lives.



[Roxanne Egan-Elliott](#)
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1 / 3 Derica Mercer and Caden Thingvold at a Your Place landscaping site in August. The social enterprise hires graduates of New Roads Therapeutic Recovery Community. Both organizations are run by Our Place. DARREN STONE, TIMES COLONIST

One of Stacey Hayden's biggest fears used to be that her parents would die before she recovered from her addiction to opiates and crack cocaine.

"I didn't want them to die thinking I was going to be like that forever," the 41-year-old said in an interview from her Pandora Avenue office, where she co-ordinates scheduling, invoicing and other logistics for landscaping company Your Place.

Opened last year, the social enterprise hires graduates of New Roads Therapeutic Recovery Community, a long-term recovery program for men and women with moderate to severe substance use who are motivated to change their lives. Both are run by Our Place.

Hayden said she started drinking and taking pills like ecstasy and other party drugs as a teenager, but didn't see it as a problem at the time.

Looking back, she sees it differently.

"I think I've been an addict pretty much my whole life. It's just it became unmanageable like 10 years ago," she said.

Her life became chaotic and she became unemployable for years.

Hayden had watched her dad get sober more than 30 years ago and grew up in Alcoholics Anonymous rooms, so she knew there was another path. "I just never wanted to admit that I was anything like my dad," she said.

When she did admit that she needed help, Hayden found her way to New Roads, where she began reconnecting with her parents after 10 years without contact.

Their weekend visits were awkward and uncomfortable at first.

"We didn't really know what to say to each other, you know, because like there were questions I'm sure that my mom wanted to ask, but that she probably knew better," she said.

Hayden has continued to see her parents regularly since she moved out of New Roads in February, and a weekly AA meeting with her dad has become the highlight of her week.

She credits her job at Your Place with providing the structure, sense of purpose and confidence she needs to rebuild her relationships with her family.

“I’m just grateful that I have the time. My dad’s 83, and my mom’s 71, and my stepdad is 75, I think. So, I’m just grateful that I have the chance,” she said.

Your Place was created as another step on the “pathway of support” offered by Our Place, said the company’s general manager, Paul Latour, who, as the founder of HeroWork, helped to renovate New Roads.

Improving likelihood of success

From a recovery perspective, getting into a long-term treatment program significantly improves the likelihood of success, Latour said — as does finding stable and sober housing following treatment.

Finding a job in a recovery-focused workplace also supports an individual to continue rebuilding their life and sobriety, Latour said.

It was with that goal of creating a workplace that provided living wages and meaningful work for those on the recovery journey that Your Place was created, he said.

“It’s giving them a leg up as opposed to a handout,” Latour said.

Every morning before heading out to the residential and commercial sites they tend to, the team gathers for a meeting. Latour describes it as an opportunity for team members to share whatever is going on with them, whether they’re struggling with something or celebrating a win.

“There’s no judgment at the table and if people need support, we support them,” said Latour, adding that encouraging employees to share when things are hard removes stigma and promotes healing.

When 25-year-old Caden Thingvold started working as a landscaper at Your Place, he was stuck inside his shell and didn't share much with his co-workers during the morning meetings.

They knew he had moved out of New Roads early so he could get his own apartment, where he could host his toddler son. But when visits with his son were postponed, Thingvold was embarrassed. He made excuses when his co-workers asked if he would see his son on the weekend.

After a few months, he started to feel close enough to his team that it felt right to open up about what was really going on. "I was sick of lying to people that just wanted nothing but the best for me."

Connecting with his co-workers and finding support allowed him to be vulnerable in his other relationships, he said.

"It was just being OK with myself and then OK with letting others see me as myself, too. That changed how I interact with people," Thingvold said.

He now sees his son every other weekend, and his apartment is filled with signs of his visits: a crib, toys on the floor and toddler prints on his guitars.

The morning meetings that he used to shy away from now ground him, and he leaves them with the same feeling he has after a recovery meeting. In the past, he wouldn't think twice about lying to people he worked with or disappearing for a weekend, because if he lost his job, he could find another one quickly, he said.

He might have thrown away his sobriety on a bad day, he said. But the support he gets from working at Your Place keeps him on his path. "This is so special. I'm not going to lose it. So like no matter what, I will not drink or drug, no matter how bad it gets."

Different questions at the interview

Derica Mercer, who became the first woman working in the field when she joined the Your Place team as a landscaper in June, could tell the job was different during her interview.

Instead of being asked about her landscaping skills, she was asked how she would stay focused on her recovery and how she would react to certain scenarios when others were struggling.

“Our health is the No. 1 thing here,” said Mercer, who became a mother at 16, dropped out of school and was working three jobs when she said she had a bad mental breakdown. One day at work, someone offered her what they said was cocaine, but turned out to be methamphetamine.

She was high for four days and from that day forward, she chased that high, losing everything in the process: her three kids, her home, her car and everything she owned.

“I kept trying to get back up and get my kids back but I kept failing, then I got in trouble with the law and ended up in jail for much of the next 10 years,” Mercer said.

Eventually, she found her way to New Roads and a job at Your Place. In July, she moved into Our Place’s new Reunification House.

Opened this spring, it provides stable housing for women coming out of New Roads, where they can reunite with their children while continuing to access recovery supports.

Mercer’s daughter stayed with her for half of August before having to return to Alberta for school.

Mercer said she wakes up every morning excited to go to work.

“Which is insane because I wake up at 4:50 in the morning,” she said.

But the best part of the work is that it keeps her on the path she wants to be on.

“The job keeps me motivated and working towards my main goal, which is my kids,” she said. “If I slip once, it’s game over. I’ll lose everything, and I’m just not prepared to do that. I just lost like 15 years of my life. I’ll never get that time back. There’s no way I can go back. So I mean, this is my shot.”

For Latour, that message confirms what he’s doing is working for employees and their customers.

“The proof is really in the pudding, because they work hard. They bring good attitudes. We get nothing but five-star reviews. There’s always learning, but the attitude and work ethic is always there,” he said.

Latour said there are more social enterprise ventures on the horizon, although he couldn’t share details. He said he wants to provide other work options for people coming out of recovery.

“We’re working on them as we speak,” he said.

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