

# SUBSTANCE

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An initiative of The City of Port Phillip's Local Drug Strategy

## A slide into the outer

By Kip Nicholas

You walk out of the gates and almost immediately find yourself in a state of bewilderment and disorientation. The prison experience comes with a finite set of sounds and colors, a rigidly defined power structure (with corresponding norms, values, and behaviours), and its own timeframe. It's a cocoon. It's your girl's embrace before a long and lonesome journey. It's that warm doona under which you hide on a winter's morn. It's violent, lonely, frustrating and frightening. You long, with indescribable intensity, to slide into the outer... and, yet, when that time comes, you question whether you're gonna survive out there. And whether you want to.

If I were asked what one word would best describe my prison-release experiences, it would be 'fear'. Fear, in all its nasty, insidious incarnations and permutations. It inhabits my consciousness in the weeks leading up to my release day. I can't seem to break through to the other side. I know I should be finding somewhere to stay when I get out. I know I've gotta find some way to stay off the gear when I get out there. But not right now - I'm too tired. What's the point anyhow?

So time rolls inexorably on while I'm lost in this paralysing fog, and suddenly I'm signing the release papers and collecting my "withheld" (compulsory savings deducted from the prison wage). I'm walking through the gates with my jail suitcase (garbage bag), my pathetic little "nest egg", and some filthy screw's "see you in a few months" ringing in my head.

So I'm a free man once more, apart from the parole, of course. I should be kissing the ground or dancing a jig. In reality I'm feeling a little deflated. I don't feel the urge to grasp my newfound freedom with both hands. I'm cautious. Tentative. Frightened. It was only after my first time in prison that I appreciated how noisy and hectic the outer can be. Life is feverish out here - it's as if someone has taken reality and pumped up the level of kinetic intensity. Cars, jobs, mobiles, women...

Thank God my girl is here to meet me. She's like Virgil in the "Inferno", except more loving. She's my guide back into the world as normal people experience it. Of course, relationships pose difficulties themselves. How do I know she hasn't moved on, recognised that I have no worth as a human being, met someone else? It's awkward. I'm awkward. I look different. My head is shaven, I'm 20kg heavier. Is she still attracted to me? We make love and I blow in twenty seconds (the famed "Victor two-stroke"). I'm ashamed. We try to go to sleep but we're agitated, uncomfortable, frustrated. We're used to sleeping alone. One of us sleeps on the floor.

Been out for at least twelve hours and, this time, I'm staying clean. I've stopped making promises years ago. Too many people, including myself, have been disappointed along the way. It's a success to get this far.

# Fragile Bonds

By Crystal Elliot

When Mum arrived from Melbourne, I was in an agitated state. The binge on speed hadn't helped. I had asked her to fly up to Sydney; I needed someone to look after my darling 1 yr old, so I could have some time out. I felt I was having a breakdown. My boyfriend had just found out I was injecting speed and he knew I used. We had used together, but for him, needles were not on.

Our arguments had totally shattered me. He was the first person I trusted since the violence of my last relationship. Mum agreed that I should go to a backpackers by the beach to sort myself out.

All I ended up doing, was using more speed to help me deal with being so distraught. I was not in a good way when I returned home. Especially when I found out, while I was away Mum had contacted social security and submitted documents to get legal custody of my daughter.

I hit the roof. I could not believe my own mother could betray me like that. I never thought about it from her perspective; trying to get Jewel in a safe environment. I thought Jewel was safe.

I never used around my daughter. She was always cared for, bathed, dressed and fed well. She was the one thing in my life that I knew I did properly. I loved her more than anything else.



Yet, I knew that I was not well and that trying to kick my addiction seemed impossible at the time. I didn't know what the future would hold. Regardless of whether I could look after myself, I knew I was taking good care of my daughter. I felt I could never forgive my Mum for what she had done.

I fought for custody and won. I got to keep my daughter. It was more than a year before I was able to speak to Mum. I told her that while I could understand her reasoning, she had gone about it the wrong way. Although I couldn't stop using without the right type of help, my love for my daughter was the one thing that kept me from committing suicide.

I later realised, mother needed to insist that I went into rehab. I guess she felt desperate and made the wrong call. I have forgiven mother because I know she was at a loss of what to do. It was tough though, I felt so betrayed.

Two years down the track, after I completing treatment and giving birth to my twin daughters, I realised just how different a mother I was. I had stopped using drugs. Though I had attended to Jewel's physical needs before rehab, there was no way in hell I was attending to her emotional needs.

My addiction: my own emotional state made that impossible. I ache, thinking of how much I was "not there" for her. Thank God mother gave me her support by caring for Jewel when I was in rehab. I have been given the chance to try and mend my relationship with my mother and to heal all the problems my addiction and separation from Jewel has caused.

Artwork by Russel Cooper

## FAMILY AND FRIENDS DRUG SUPPORT GROUP

**Do you have someone in the family who uses drugs?**

**Do you need someone to talk to in a similar position?**

**Do you need to learn more about drugs and their effects?**

The Families & Friends Drug Support Group offers practical assistance and information for drug specific issues and support within a friendly and informal atmosphere.

*Some topics covered in previous meetings include:*

- A personal experience of prison
- Personal power, changing peoples' perspectives
- Demystifying the criminal courts

The families & Friends Drug Support Group meets on the last Wednesday of the month at 7.00 pm at the Elwood/St Kilda Neighbourhood Learning Centre, 87 Tennyson Street, Elwood. You are warmly invited to attend the next meeting of our group – all welcome.

# WORDS AND WOMEN FROM WINJA ULUPNA



Artwork by Dooka from Galiamble

Exhibition is called Deadly  
In Koori, deadly means looking good  
Tracy's painting a Mother Snake  
The snake is minding her Babies  
They've just hatched out of the eggs  
Tracy is pregnant

Cheryl does super fine work  
Master of the fine dot  
A lot of people here haven't painted before

They develop different styles  
Some are colourists, some are masters  
Masters of fine work  
Everyone works at their own pace  
Their own style

People find their own voice  
It's self expression  
It's decision making

Ann Holt has been teaching for two years  
She says:  
Tracy was so shy  
When she first got here, she didn't want to paint  
She said she couldn't do it  
I kept encouraging her  
She tried it

Cheryl had never done anything like this before  
'My kids were pretty proud of me,'  
She says  
'My daughter was more excited than me'  
Cheryl inspires her family  
Some have begun to paint



Artwork by Susan Naden



Artwork by Cheryl Hood



Artwork by Tracy Morgan

A strong work ethic  
New skills travel to the public arena  
Throughout Victoria  
Communities see the art  
Heaps of good feedback

It's nerve racking but exciting out there  
People are proud

The Deadly exhibition was an Urban Dreaming Project of the Centre for Creative Ministries and Ngwala Willumbong Cooperative Ltd. It was held in September at the Carlisle Contemporary Health Practice.

Compiled by Robyn Szechtman through an interview with Cheryl Hood, Tracy Morgan and Ann Holt.



by David Moore

I've spent the last two years talking to drug users in St Kilda. What I've learned is that we need to think about drug use in a new way if we want to improve their health. Health workers talk to drug users about the dangers of sharing 'fits' or mixing drugs. Even though drug users understand these messages, they still share syringes and they still mix drugs. One popular explanation for this is that drug users are selfish, lazy and irresponsible. Another way of thinking about it is to look at the lives of drug users and the places where they use drugs. I heard many stories about sharing syringes late at night because clean 'fits' were not available. This is an example of how aspects of the place can influence the ways in which people use drugs.

In St Kilda, there is a strong link between street sex work and drug use. Street sex workers risk murder, kidnapping, sexual and physical assault, robbery, arrest and sexually transmitted infection. Some are homeless and many others do not live in the same place for very long. Although they worry about their drug use, they also have to worry about being arrested by the 'jacks' and bashed or raped by 'mugs'. But they also need the money from sex work to stop 'hanging out'. Because of their dangerous lives, many of these women have developed a fatalistic attitude to their drug use: "If I drop, I drop" or "I know I'm taking a risk but I don't care".

Many of the drug users I spoke to said they liked 'getting smashed' on drugs. As Gary told me, "I'm into risk-taking behaviour ... I like to get off my face, you know?" In their eyes, 'getting smashed' can be a response to feeling upset, falling in love with the effects of a new drug, being given a 'freebie', being part of a drug-using group or using too much of a drug by mistake. Asking drug users to use less will not work if 'getting smashed' is the main reason for drug use.

Another health message is 'never use heroin alone'. This advice ignores the reality of life on the streets. One conversation I saw featured a female sex worker telling another woman not to have a 'shot' in a nearby park. The sex worker told the other woman to take her (the sex worker's) boyfriend with her in case she 'dropped'. The woman looked hesitant. The sex worker assured her that the boyfriend would not expect a 'shot' in return for looking after her and that her money and drugs would be safe from him.

# BUSINESS



Photo by Russel Cooper

While health workers should keep offering advice to drug users, they will not listen if the lives they lead and the places in which they use drugs are not also changed. Improving their health also means doing something about the many problems they face – such as finding a place to live and avoiding violence. It also means changing some aspects of the places in which they use drugs, such as making clean 'fits' available '24-7'.

\*Gary is a fictitious name.



# CODE OF THE CLUB

My last girlfriend Caroline introduced me to dope in 1991. I loved her and she was definitely the more adventurous within our relationship. When we smoked joints in my flat in Essendon, we would forget that our relationship was structurally weak.

Dope provided the relationship's best moments, which I medicalised by calling THC. Although it is ironic that I can't remember one thing that we did or spoke about, when stoned!

When I talk about 'structural weakness,' this is code for the mother of all problems. I really liked men and having sex with them. Yes, I was gay. Can you imagine the stress in my life leading this dark double life? THC took away all those feelings of self-disgust and guilt. My drug taking became worse when Caroline and I broke up, but I soon fell in love with a nice country man. Unfortunately, he also liked THC and introduced me to cones and the occasional bucket bong. Eventually, we broke up and that was the start of a consistent pattern of THC consumption.

For the next two years, I smoked everyday without fail. I couldn't dedicate myself to anything or anyone. I couldn't focus on studies or a career. I turned away from friends and family: missed funerals and weddings, found it hard to keep a consistent weight, lived only for the moment. Those days are now over, but THC gave me all the unconditional love I needed. My drug history has definitely grown along with my coming-out journey. I'm at my worst when I'm having relationship difficulties or post-break-up, wondering whether my lack of a permanent partner will mean that I will die alone.

The only other drug I do is Ecstasy, which I have about a dozen times a year at dance parties. It is much easier to play eye games with a man you're keen on, when your shirt is off, you're floating in a self induced paradise and the hormones are on red alert! Ecstasy is rife in the gay dance party scene. The irony being: that the fitter and sexier the man, the more likely he seems to indulge in multiple recreational drugs. Another irony being that they all seem professional career minded men. Yes mum, doctors do take Ecstasy.

Speed is the next most popular drug after Ecstasy and remains an enduring favourite. Party boys don't like anything perceived as 'heavy' or dangerously powerful. I have never known, seen or heard of heroin being used as a party drug.

Sadly, tolerance, access to, and use of party drugs, dictates acceptance into the 'straight acting, masculine, blokey and shirts-off gay men's club'. It means getting into the major parties and meeting potentially hotter boyfriends.

If you don't have the body, aura and drugs, then you are going to find it hard to make the club. Which of course puts pressure on all the thousands of young, gay, male wannabes to succumb to party drugs in order to crack the big time.

Sebastian



Venus by Natalie E. Verrocchi

# Matters of Substance

## A Tribute to Peta

By Trevor Donohue



Artwork by Linda Shiers

We are all familiar with Peta, even if you did not know her name.

Her small bedraggled figure could be seen, usually sucking on a plastic bag, based with a yellow substance, anywhere at any time in St Kilda or Port Melbourne.

We who knew her best wondered how she could possibly survive, until that indefinable moment in time when individually we stopped worrying.

Life had been cruel and yet she was always there with a ragged smile, (it seemed as if yet another tooth had disappeared) if there was any anger at her life it was never directed any anyone else, her rages were against herself.

Of all the cruel blows she had received, it was the finality of her last day that was the cruellest of them all. There had been an acceleration downwards, the glue, the alcohol, the abuse had taken their toll. Physical violence was becoming the pattern of her existence.

God had abandoned her, I had abandoned her. Many of us loved Peta for her innocence. She was the perpetual victim and we began to accept that as her role in life. Sensitivity had been dulled. Complacency had taken reign, she was somebody else's worry, not ours.

Where she sought sanctuary she found horror. Where she needed a friend she found faces turned away. A gentle soul was devoured by the brutes.

Peta is in Heaven. She has already been in hell. God has justified his mistake.

### Special Thanks to:

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This newsletter is an initiative of Port Phillip's Local Drug Strategy

## Are you concerned about the impact that drugs are having on our community?

We invite you to join our Drugs and Community Partnerships Forum which meets monthly to discuss drug related issues and generate solutions to local problems.

The meetings are action focussed with people from all walks of life forming into action groups to work on issues including gaps in current services, community education, employment opportunities and prevention initiatives.

We also have a range of guest speakers each Forum speaking about interesting topics, experiences and services.

The Drugs and Community Partnerships Forum occur the last Wednesday of every month at the St Kilda Town Hall at 12.30 – 2.30, corner of Carlisle Street and Brighton Road. For more information, please contact Robyn Szechtman on 9209 6694.

## We need your Substance!

We are looking for contributions to our newsletter from people who have been affected by drugs in some way. This may be through personal use, someone close to you or as a resident of Port Phillip. Contributions can be in the form of poetry, art, an article or creative writing. We would also love to hear any burning opinion on a drug related issue or something you have read in Substance. Please contact Robyn Szechtman on

9209 6694 or post to Private Bag No.3, PO St Kilda 3182.