



ON THIN ICE

Stories of ice addiction & recovery

A Tuggeranong Arts Centre project

Introduction

Tuggeranong Arts Centre (TAC) is delighted to present *On Thin Ice* – an arts-documentary collaboration between journalist and author Ginger Gorman, photographers Hilary Wardhaugh and Martin Ollman, sculptor Tom Buckland, and printmaker Jess Higgins, which tells the stories of six Canberra residents who have been living with or recovering from addiction to crystal methamphetamine (ice).

TAC has long been an organisation which strives to use art to engage with important social issues and to empower communities to tell their own stories.

This particular project grew out of a suite of public programs delivered alongside the exhibition *Another Day in Paradise* in early 2018. The Human Condition program saw many community groups, students, teachers, activists and artists come together to create projects that challenged violence, oppression and injustice. Amongst them were social justice journalist Ginger Gorman and communities of Canberrans recovering from addiction to alcohol and other drugs.

From the conversations we had at this time, it became clear that there was a need to tell the real stories of addiction and recovery in our community. There was a need to go beyond headlines and stereotypes, beyond snap judgments and prejudices, beyond “meth crisis” and “ice epidemic.”

People with addictions are part of our community. The stigma and isolation too often placed on them only makes the arduous journey to recovery more difficult. By sharing stories of recovery, we hope to use the arts to encourage empathy in the broader community and to promote recovery as a supported, collective effort.

In this booklet you will find the stories of six remarkable individuals who have worked closely with Ginger Gorman to share their experiences in their own words. The booklet accompanies a multi-disciplinary exhibition of images, sound and installation on display at TAC from 7 – 30 November 2019. Together, we hope that they may go some way to reframing the narratives around ice use in Australia and encouraging a more empathic response to addiction and recovery.

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I would like to thank all of the participants who have bravely shared their stories as part of this project. Thanks also to Ginger and the other artists for their dedication to working sensitively and collaboratively to bring these stories to audiences. And finally, thanks to the staff at the Salvation Army Recovery Centre for their help and enthusiasm in making this project possible.

I hope that this project will allow you to engage with these stories and help you to better understand people living with addictions.

Rauny Worm

CEO, Tuggeranong Arts Centre

LINDA

Hi. My name's Linda. I'm 31 and I've been using ice, on and off, since I was 28.

I grew up in a pretty dysfunctional family with two alcoholic parents and a brother, who's four years older than me. Because of our parents' drinking, there was a lot of domestic violence. I started using drugs when I was 12.

There was a lot of fighting, always a lot of fighting, and a lot of trips to the hospital with Mum. My dad would physically hurt her. I remember the screams and Mum getting hurt. He stabbed her a few times. He's kicked her ribs in, black eyes, broken arms. Being a little kid, trying to look after your mum and keep her safe was really hard. I just remember being really, really scared and trying to look after Mum when I couldn't, you know? I don't have any happy childhood memories.

My brother tried to keep me away from it, keep me safe. He'd take me to his room and play Tupac really, really loud so I didn't hear the screams. I've never seen Mum and Dad without a drink. Dad worked, but they were always drinking and it would get to a point where they'd get really, really drunk and then that's when the fighting would start. They drank 24/7. It was just a social norm. Everybody we associated with were drinkers and

Dad grew and sold weed so a lot of drug deals went through the house. People came round and scored.

I started smoking weed when I was 12. It was readily available in our house. And then I started taking Valium and Serepax from my brother's girlfriend. I was interested at first. I wanted to know what they were doing. And then, once I started doing it, it took a lot of the care away – like I didn't care about what was going on at home and I could just get smashed and not think about it. It helped me cope.

I was at school then, but hardly ever going. I'd mostly stay home with Mum because she could hardly do anything after Dad hurt her. He'd go to work and, if she didn't have the household stuff, like dinner and things, ready when he got home – even if she was really badly injured – he'd flog her again.

It seemed normal to me. It seemed like it was just normal. You know, Mum put a lot of her emotional stuff onto me, like a lot of tears, a lot of crying. And we weren't really allowed to say anything to anybody. We were told not to; to cover it up, really. Dad just said it was Mum's fault; that Mum was a stupid alcoholic and she made him do it. That kind of thing.

When we got to about 14, that's when he started to get a bit more violent towards us, because we started to be able to stand up to him a little bit. If I'd try to cover Mum and stop Dad from kicking her or hitting her, he just laid into the both of us. They'd have a big fight and she'd sneak out, or Dad would kick her out. Then she'd come back and knock on my bedroom window, and she'd say, "Could you get me my wine and my cigarettes?" because that's all she cared about – because that's what she wanted. And so, I'd get her wine and her cigarettes and then she'd sneak into my room through my bedroom window and climb into my bed. Dad would wake up at, like, 3 o'clock in the morning and, if he found her in my room, he'd flog her in my bed while I was asleep next to her. And that was just the norm.

Eventually, when I was about 13 or 14, we left. Dad had assaulted my mum and my brother to the point he nearly killed my mum. So, the police charged him and we went to my auntie's house and stayed there. Then Mum got her own place, but she let Dad back to come and do the same thing there so I ended up leaving when I was 15.



Hilary Wardhaugh, Linda, On Thin Ice, 2019, Digital Image.

I went to Kanangra Court – public housing flats. I lived there with my boyfriend of the time. He'd been my best friend when I was 12. He was someone I thought would always look after me and I went to him for, like, I don't know – protection? We stayed on the top floor of Kanangra Court and we sold weed out of the apartment. A couple of the older guys who ran a lot of the flats down the bottom looked after me a bit, kept an eye on me. Our door got kicked in a lot of times. My boyfriend got bashed a lot of times. I had water thrown at me. I had some guy try to take me into the laundries when I was doing washing. I don't know what he was going to do, but he dragged me in there. It wasn't until a few of the boys came that he let me go, and then he ran off. That was when ice first came into Canberra – when people were just starting to use ice. I don't think it was as horrendous then as it would be now in Canberra.

I was with my boyfriend for 10 years. I had my three other kids to him. We went back and forth from his parents' house to Kanangra. And then, after I had my first daughter in 2005, we went up to the Gold Coast. I was about 18, then. I was at Gold Coast when I started trying ecstasy and ice just for the fun of it, really. My boyfriend was the one who introduced me to all the heavy drugs. I guess it was because I was stuck at home with the kids, so he brought it to me to be able to use – mostly ecstasy and smoking a bit of ice. We would get

high on the weekends. We'd party for the weekend and then, through the week, we'd take turns in coming down from whatever we'd taken to get back to reality. I actually don't think I felt the full effect of the ice while I was mixing it with other drugs. It was not until later, when I became fully addicted, and ice was my only drug-of-choice, that I felt the full impact, I think.

Smoking ice made me feel like nothing was a problem. I've just realised that I've always had anxiety from when I was a little kid – that gut feeling in your stomach that you're always worried, you know? And I was always worried about Mum after I left home. The ice just made everything seem okay. It made life seem like it was okay.

I look back now and I know I wasn't taking care of my daughter properly. Minimal, I reckon; I was doing the bare minimum to look after her. I might have been there physically to give her meals, dress her, bathe her, put her to bed, but I wasn't with her emotionally – to help her grow developmentally. I neglected a lot of her needs as a little child. It's not something I'm proud of. It was just the lifestyle. It's what I'd had as a child. It's what I'd seen as a child. So I just kind of replayed that in my own life.

I had my second daughter a little bit after that. They're about 18 months apart. I had her up in Queensland and that's when it got really, really hard to manage – using drugs and looking after both children.

My boyfriend would go out and he'd say, "I'll just go and get you some weed." And, instead of going to get weed, he'd take his whole pay and come back with no money. So, we ended up getting kicked out of a few places up there, and we just jumped from place to place.

Eventually, I came back down to Canberra and left him up at the Gold Coast for a little while. I went to live with his mother. I knew I was living chaotically, but mostly, I was just thinking, "If I can just get through today..." Yeah. "If I can just get through today, then that's okay." That's all I worried about – getting through each day. I wasn't even thinking clearly about what was going to happen tomorrow or whether or not there'd be a tomorrow. I wasn't thinking about where we were going to stay or what my children's ongoing needs were – you know, future stuff. I was just stuck in the day – the daily things – "Let's just get through today."

Then my boyfriend came back down to Canberra and then I had my son. That's when I got my own housing place and that's when my boyfriend got really, really bad on the ice and the heroin. That's when he first introduced me to needles, too. The first time I used drugs intravenously, it was ice, and then I took Endone, and then I took heroin. But injecting heroin made me too sick, so I just stuck with the ice. Injecting ice gives you a bigger rush. It hits you straight away. It's mostly just the effect. The only reason I started using a needle

I have my good and my bad days, but I'm pretty hopeful today. I'm feeling pretty good. The sun's out. You know, I can only just keep trying.

was because my pipe broke and my boyfriend didn't tell me. He said, "There's no other way you can take it, so I'm going to take it all if you don't inject it." He did it for me, at first.

Around 2013, when my kids were about 2, 5 and 6, things got really, really chaotic. My partner, got drug-induced psychosis. He locked himself in the house for a week straight and had Care and Protection involvement as well, because his parents were worried. That's when they stepped in and said, "You've got to leave him, or we're going to take the kids. You're going to lose the kids."

I left him. I went back to the house. He came back and put a knife to my throat and made a big scene. Then the cops were called and Care and Protection said, "You can't keep the children safe, so we're removing the children until you can get yourself in a better position to be safe and look after them."

It was really surreal because I was still using ice. So, the reality of it didn't really sink in too much. My boyfriend convinced me that if I stuck with him, he would fix it and we'd get the kids

back. I kept using ice with him. And then I realised the kids weren't coming back. Care and Protection were going for 18-year orders – they wanted to keep the kids in care until they were 18. So that's when I kicked him out and stopped using. It took me 18 months to get them back into my care.

In 2015, Mum got really sick with cirrhosis of the liver and she was in hospital. It wasn't looking good and my brother said, "You know, you've got to look after Mum." He was starting to smoke ice then, and he said, "Oh, have a little bit of this." It took me about a week of smoking it with him before I was fully needing it to stay in control – to look after three kids and look after Mum in hospital.

After three months, it was chaotic. My house was absolutely chaotic. It was trashed. I wasn't coping. And if I had done something then and went to rehab or addressed it, I probably had a chance. But Care and Protection stepped in and put the kids back into the care of my boyfriend's Mum – their grandma. I'm so grateful for what she's done in the kids' life – for being there. She's never once said anything bad about me or made me out to be bad to them. She's made it possible for my kids and I to have a really loving relationship because of how she explained the situation to them.

At first, I was seeing my kids fortnightly and speaking to them on the phone. But then I wasn't allowed to talk to them

about coming home because it would make them more upset. So, it was kind of like, "Let's not pretend this is OK" – you know, the elephant in the room kind of thing?

I was devastated. I couldn't cope. I felt like I was going to die. I thought, "I can't live with this. This is not bearable. How am I going to live life without them?" So I just kept using to try to make it feel better. And before I knew it, two years had gone by and I was living in a crack house doing the most unimaginable things to get my next fix. And then I fell pregnant again.

What I've experienced within the family homes where people have lost their children because of ice use is that they keep on using it, just to emotionally keep themselves content with what's happening. It's just destroying family after family and it's not getting any better. It's really, really hard psychologically to get out of the cycle of ice use. I don't think there's much compassion for ice addicts. I think there's a bit of a let down in the system where, you know, Care and Protection, or the system, fails to support a parent into getting their children back – then they shame them and make them feel worse. I really don't know what the alternative would look like, but I'd like to see more compassion, I think, and more support around positives, not negatives. Like, give us some hope. Give hope that it could be better and that you could get your children back rather than be negative

like, “Look what you’ve done. This is never going to go away. You’re never going to get your children back.”

Without hope, I couldn’t cope. In a matter of two years, my house turned from a normal, three-bedroomed, nice, clean house to absolutely filthy – rubbish everywhere, no couches, just absolute squalor. And I did unimaginable things. I did a lot of crime – a lot of break and enters. I robbed a lot of people and it was a thrill. It was just like, “Let’s do that at night, get our money, get the drugs, then do it all again tomorrow.” Without my kids, I felt I didn’t have anything to lose – to the point where I didn’t even think about the danger of sharing needles. I didn’t think about the diseases I could have caught. I didn’t care about getting caught and going to jail. I just had no care in the world. I lost my licence drug-driving. I still drove. I didn’t get caught driving without a licence, but, yeah, no care.

I couldn’t stop using when I was pregnant with my youngest. I used throughout the whole pregnancy. Care and Protection said, “You know, if you can produce clean urines, you can keep your son.” I couldn’t produce clean urines, so they said, “If you don’t do something, you’re going to lose him, too.” So, I went to a rehab and I did the family program with him. My son was about two by then.

My mum passed away a month or two before I graduated. I came out of rehab and then I relapsed three to six months

after I came out. I think I relapsed because I never addressed the issues about my mum. I still hold a lot of grief and trauma about my mum. And I think I had reservations that I could use again – that it would be okay if I just used one more time. “Just one more time,” you know? But you know that is never the case. You can’t use ice one more time and then expect your life to still function normally. So then, my youngest son was taken away, too.

I needed to do something then, because my drug wasn’t working anymore. It wasn’t taking away the pain of not having the kids or of how I’d failed them as a mum. So, I came here to the Salvation Army Recovery Centre to do something about myself, so that I can live a life without using. I’ve been here about twelve weeks now. I’m learning how to live life without using drugs, how to deal with my emotions a lot easier, and how to reach out for support when I’m struggling. So far, it’s good. I have my hard days. Sometimes it’s really, really hard and people really, really annoy me. It’s hard being told what to do. But, you know, the people here are really lovely too.

For me, the biggest thing I have to learn is how to be okay with the past. I can’t change it. I can’t change what I’ve done; how I’ve let my kids down. All I can do is show how I am going to be in their life now they’re getting to be 13, 14 and little people; where I am going to sit in all of

that and be the best version I can be of myself to be there for them as they grow.

There’s a chance when I go back to court in October that I might get my youngest son back. I didn’t come in here to change the 18-year orders. You know, the only reason to come in here was to be the best person I can be. So, we’ll soon see if I can. I hope that I can change and not feel I have to rely on drugs to live my life. I want to be the best person I can be because I know my children aren’t really going to want to have anything to do with me if I keep using drugs. I’ve only just started to notice, now, that it’s my responsibility. I have to take responsibility for what I’ve done, instead of playing the victim of, “This happened ...,” you know, “Why me?” or “This happened to me...” I think my responsibility now is to take action to deal with the past, get the help that I need to deal with things like the trauma from my childhood, and not let history repeat with my children.

I’d like to say to families that have people who are addicted to ice not to give up on them – to support them the best way you can. I know it’s hard for families not to get hurt, but the more support and love and compassion they have from people they love, the more likely they are to go and get help.

I have my good and my bad days, but I’m pretty hopeful today. I’m feeling pretty good. The sun’s out. You know, I can only just keep trying.

MYALLA

Hi. My name's Myalla. I'm 24. I've been an addict for nine years and I've had an ice problem for four years. I'm also Aboriginal. Woodridge, Beenleigh and Eagleby is where I'm from.

It started at the age of 15 with alcohol. I started drinking really heavily and then I started smoking pot at 17. But with pot, I couldn't get any higher after a certain amount, so then I picked up ice when I was 20 years old.

When I was 15, I was at a mate's 18th and I'd had a couple of jelly shots (alcoholic jelly) and got, you know, like that euphoria. But I was kicked out of home the day before my 16th and then I was homeless. I had a lot of friends and family pass away. The pain was too much and the drugs, the pot, just didn't work. So, after a lot of grief, I turned to drugs at the age of 17. I went onto ice, but I haven't been smoking it since I got back into rehab.

I was actually removed from my mum (by CYPS [Community and Youth Protection Services] or DoCS [Department of Community Services] in Queensland) when I was four years old because she was an alcoholic and there was a lot of domestic violence. Then I was given to my grandmother, my dad's mum. Our relationship wasn't the best.

It was really toxic. She would be hard on me and I had to earn a lot of the things I was given. I had to clean the house all the time, and do gardening every Saturday. She called me "black," "fat," "ugly," "not enough." It was just a quite awful environment.

She was part of the Stolen Generation and she was just really set in her ways. She would say, "You're not my grandkid. You're too black." She would say her son wasn't my dad – that I was someone else's kid. She'd say I "looked evil" all the time, and that I was going to murder someone one day. There were just a lot of put downs. She put me down heaps. It was really hard growing up with her.

So I did a lot of things outside of home. School was my safe haven. I excelled in school. I was an A student in English, B student in dance and drama, and I just always wanted to be at school and away from home. That's kind of how I spent my school years.

With the childhood trauma I had, and having a lot of deaths in the family, and having friends pass away, it definitely got overwhelming. It was constant pain and grief and it was always one on top of the other. It just was never-ending funerals and, yeah, I just had to get out of myself.

So I drank. Sometimes, I thought I was 10 foot tall and bulletproof. Sometimes I'd cry, especially if it was at a wake or something. But other than that, there were days where I didn't stop. I didn't start drinking heavily until I was kicked out of home – after my 16th. I dropped out of high school at the beginning of Year 12 because a really close friend of mine died. So the heavy drinking side of it started at 16. Yeah. 16 years old.

I guess, at the time, my grandmother and I were clashing all the time and she didn't like my behaviour. I was a really wild sort of kid. I was also a bully. I'd either be the bully at school or I'd be the person *being* bullied. And you know, I really missed my mum. And having somebody always degrading me and putting me down – not building me up – just really broke my relationship with my grandmother. She told me to get out. She didn't think I'd leave, but I did. But before I left, she beat me.

When they took me and my brother off our mum, DoCS had given my nan custody of us. So I went to DoCS with bruises and a split lip but they said they couldn't do anything; they'd closed my case when I was 13 years old. I had no idea and I kind of lost my cool in the

office at DoCS. I didn't know what to do from there on. I went straight to a family friend's in Loganlea. I said I'd got kicked out and needed somewhere to live. She said she'd talk to her partner. In the meantime, I went to another friend and stayed in her garden shed for the night. The next morning was my 16th birthday. That day, on my birthday, I remember going to an ex's mum's funeral, so I didn't go to school that day either. Keeping up with school got really tough.

It was really rough, couch-surfing all the time, being unstable mentally and emotionally, you know – kind of having that feeling of being unwanted and unloved and rejected and all that sort of stuff. While all this was happening, my brother had got locked up on a manslaughter charge and was looking at 15 to life. I felt like my world just fell around me and I couldn't do anything about it. I just wanted my mum *really* badly. I would see my mum on and off. Every couple of years she'd pop up out of nowhere. But then, when I was kicked out, I couldn't go and live with her.

I remember I was invited to my nan's 70th birthday and I just got back from the NRL Allstars Youth Summit on the Gold Coast with, I think, Beenleigh High School. I dropped my stuff off, went to her party, and a lot of my family were there. Then, all of a sudden, there was this family brawl at my nan's 70th that nan was a part of. It just got too much for me and I got really awkward – intense – and I just legged it. I was really

hurt seeing the same cycle of abuse – the family not getting along, always fighting, always ruining a good family event. And I guess, from there on, I just kind of avoided them because it was just too much.

I went to my auntie's house and my cousins were smoking weed and I just joined them. The pot made me really relaxed, as pot will do. It definitely stopped me from feeling. It got me to a point where I just didn't care about anything. I thought my life was better by taking pot. I started selling it at school. By the time I started smoking pot, I'd transferred to Ipswich High and I was doing really well there, but the pot addiction got too much and I would stay home and smoke it all the time. That happened for a couple of years.

I started ice when I was 20 years old after my cousin and my grandfather had passed away, one after the other. At the end of my pot addiction, I was smoking three or four quarters a day [21g-28g], which is a pretty high habit. I just got really immune to it, so I needed another drug to get me high. So then I started smoking ice. I did get more creative on ice. I designed my own tattoos that I've got on me today. It was really good for me back then because it just took all feeling away and I was so numb that I didn't cry and didn't feel. I isolated on ice.

By then I was living at the Gold Coast. We had a little house. It was a three-

bedroom. You know, we had a pretty decent lounge room and there would be one guy, he'd pretty much lived in the lounge room, but he had his own bedroom. And he had, like, an Xbox set up and like he'd have dubstep playing. He'd have Ozzy hip-hop music playing and we got used to hearing that, but he was off his guts all the time.

At the age of 15, he used to sell acid in Brisbane and his brother-in-law actually was our cook who cooked up the crack for us. And then there was a New Zealand couple that owned the house and they were in a really violent relationship, really toxic. She had her kids removed from her care. So, it was really quite dysfunctional already.

I thought I had made really good friends, which was totally untrue, you know. I was in a really bad environment where I thought it was just the best house ever – even though we'd have the Gold Coast CIB (Criminal Investigation Branch) knock on our door for a gun raid and, like, we didn't have any guns at that time, but... I remember letting the cops bring me home. And, you know, I'd sweep the same floor over and over in the same spot. And then eventually, I'd sweep the roof and I'd walk out and think, "I look good," but really, my jaw's going a hundred miles an hour.

I met the New Zealand couple through this place called The Edge in Beenleigh and I just became really good friends with them because they did drugs. The Edge is

a Christian-based non-profit organisation for the homeless and youth-at-risk. I used to work there after I quit school and I used to go to the girls' group there. Nikki and Rob Cheslin were the co-founders of that place and they're amazing people. Nikki is Greek and Rob is Australian and they're just the most amazing people I've ever met in my life. Whenever I would try to get a clean break, I would work for a nonprofit organisation, but I would still do pot. So, really, I was never 'clean' clean. I was either doing one drug or another.

I fell pregnant at 21 and I had my eldest daughter. She was removed out of my care due to domestic violence and a drug relationship with her dad. Her dad and I obviously weren't really good for each other. He had schizophrenia and Cluster B personality disorder. And I had this mad, raging drug habit of ice, and we kind of neglected her and didn't do our duty. We kind of let her down. He was on drugs, too. I think, at the end of our relationship, he started using intravenously. I would never inject. I'd always smoke my drugs.

My daughter was six months when I had Child Protection come to my door with a bunch of police. I'd called the cops the night before to get her dad removed for threatening to kill her, and me. That was the only time I'd ever called the police. And then, I kind of got kicked when I was down because I asked for help and I had my daughter taken the next day.

It just didn't seem real on the day it happened. You know, they came to have a talk to me to ask what had happened, why I'd had my partner removed from my house. And I told them why and they had a look around the house and there were bongos in the bathroom. Obviously, I wasn't thinking, I was still so rattled from the night before from having her dad threaten to kill me and our daughter. And I was still kind of coming down because I'd used a little bit the night before. But even though I was coming down, they took immediate action to take her. I actually had to put my daughter in the car and watch them drive away with her. That was one of the hardest, hardest things I've ever had to do.

They took her to the hospital straight from my house. I talked to a family friend and said, "They're taking my daughter!" We decided to call my aunty, but I said, "Can you call her, because she's not talking to me." So they called my aunty and asked if she could come and look after my daughter. She was there, like, *instantly*. She followed the CYPS car to the hospital. My aunty had her for a while but then my aunty and her girlfriend couldn't cope. Their relationship was breaking down and there was some domestic violence happening within the house. I wasn't aware of it at the time. My aunty gave my daughter to a family friend and she's been with her ever since. My daughter is three now. She's definitely in a happy, healthy home, but I do miss her. I see her once a week for two hours.

Looking back, I'm really grateful that all happened. My daughter's great today. We have a really good connection. We have a great bond. Having time in recovery definitely made me reflect and realise that was probably the best thing at that time. I wasn't a very fit mum. I was really in denial about my usage. I put drugs and a toxic partner relationship in front of my daughter and I'm grateful today that she's where she is.

They wanted to put an 18-year order in place last year – to keep her in care until she is 18 – but I fought against it. Under an 18-year order I'd only get to see her six times a year. I got a really great lawyer, I saw a forensic psychologist and I did urines three days a week. I kept clean, I kept busy and then it was changed in January this year to a two-year order. Hopefully she'll be back either next year or the year after but, when I leave here, they're going to start upping my visitation to two days a week.

Since then, I've had another baby. When I got into recovery for the second time, I realised I really needed to get my stuff together. I had come in to CRS (Canberra Recovery Services) in 2017 and met my youngest child's dad and we became really good friends. We got really close. He got stood down from CRS and was staying at my house. I went back there on my weekend leave and that's when I got pregnant. I came back to rehab and I didn't know I was pregnant until I went to the doctor's a week later. Because I was



Hilary Wardhaugh, Myalla, On Thin Ice, 2019, Digital image.

pregnant, CRS decided they needed to transfer one of us. My boyfriend said he'd go. We did talk about other options, but I could never do that to my kids. So, both of us ended up leaving CRS. He went to Sydney. I stayed here, in Canberra, and I managed to stay clean for 13 months.

My youngest daughter is just over 17 months old now. She's with her dad. Her dad graduated from this program last November, I think, and now he has 100 per cent care of her. She wasn't taken from me. I had to give her up in sobriety the day my uncle died because of my mental health. Her father's doing a great job with her. I get to see her three times a week. And when I do go on leave from here for the weekend, I get to have her for the night. So, that's great. But it

is really hard, not having my daughters. I do miss them every day, but right now, I need to do this program for me.

As an ice addict it's hard to get help. I use the word 'addict' because ice addiction here is a massive epidemic. (You know, I had a family friend recently just get off life support. They have 10 per cent heart function due to ice addiction.) You definitely get treated differently to people with other addictions. I experienced it in AA rooms. I know that AA is for alcoholics, but if you say that you're an ice addict, some of them are like, "Oh, you can't share," or, "No, this isn't really the place for you." It's really disheartening because alcohol is the first drug I picked up. But if you identify as an addict, we get looked at differently; you

don't get to share at a lot of meetings and we feel really judged. I would just like everyone to be more open, you know. Alcohol is a drug as well. It is in our NA preamble on a Friday night at Ainsley: Do not be confused. Alcohol is a drug, too, because *ethanol* is a drug. Whether you're addicted to alcohol or ice, you're a drug addict, just the same.

In March this year, on the same day I had to give up my second daughter, my uncle died. I relapsed after nearly having 13 months clean. The day after I'd lapsed, I called CRS straight away and said, "I need to come in. Can you get me in?" I just didn't want to get stuck back on the addiction train and never get off it. My recent relapses went on forever and it took me ages to get back into recovery. I didn't want to do that again. I needed a program so I could have access to my kids.

I chose this program, because I have faith in God, the Christian God. Having this place run by the Salvation Army really helps with my faith and my spirituality. There's a symbol of NA (Narcotics Anonymous) and AA, which is the triangle for "mental, spiritual and emotional." You've got to have those three things in order to stay clean. I'm definitely doing a lot of emotional sobriety. I've never cried so much in my life as I have in this recovery. It's definitely been the most heartbreaking. But spirituality-wise, I've got a great faith in God. Yeah, He's taken some people from my life that I loved

dearly, but you know, without Him, I wouldn't be here today. And mentally? I really need to get all that sorted.

Without music, I wouldn't be here today. Music saved my life. Without music today, I think I would go absolutely insane. You know, there are a lot of great artists in the world that speak from their hearts and from their experiences in life – how tough it is – and that's something I can relate to. Definitely, when I'm down and out, music is something I like to listen to. I love Linkin Park. I'm really saddened that Chester died. I love Paramore. Hayley Williams is an amazing artist. Randy Travis, Alan Jackson, Justin Bieber. I love Justin Bieber. Tech N9ne, Eminem. I listen to them all the time. I either have my earphones in or I have my speaker playing. When I'm painting, or drawing, or colouring in or, when I'm in the shower, I crank it.

My painting definitely helps me with my anger management and my mindfulness when I want to chill out or when I'm really angry. I do a lot of dot painting. In order to do the dots precisely, I need to be able to calm down and do it properly. Otherwise, it's all over the place. It's teaching me to just sit with myself and just *be* with it; in the moment. And also, it's a great distraction technique. You know, I don't want a cigarette, and I don't want to use or drink when I'm painting or drawing.

My paintings are small – about A4 size – but they take a couple of days. I could sit

there, painting, for hours. Sometimes, I paint before bed. That way I'm really tired and I get a good night's sleep.

I used to watch my cousins and my uncles paint all the time. I never used to be able to touch the table if they were painting because I would bump it. But I could sit there and watch them for hours. I am definitely inspired by my family.

I use the normal earth colours – the ochres: the yellow, the brown, the reds, the black, yellow. Sometimes I do like blue, pink or green, just to give it that modern look. I got those ideas from down here, actually. I'll do my traditional colours, but then there are some times where I use the modern colours and I love both. It's what I want to do.

I've been here, at CRS, for four months, so I've got six months to go. I hope I'm progressing really well. I've definitely struggled behavioural-wise. I'm not the best student any more, but I'm learning. There's still a lot of learning to do, but I have a bright hopes for the future. Hayley Williams has a song where she talks about that small spark that is just enough to keep you going.

“It's just a spark but it's enough to keep me going

And when it's dark out and no one's around it keeps glowing.”

That's something I really, really love.

I want to be an influential person in the community. I do hope I can make a difference. I want to go back home and

talk to the youth at risk back there and say, “You know, addiction's hard, but not getting into recovery is harder.” There's a massive ice epidemic back home. I know a lot of my family members sniff glue and drink. Alcohol is massive as well. I've recently had my dad and my uncle die from alcohol and I've had a cousin overdose from it as well. So it is massive in our Aboriginal remote communities.

How can we fix it? Well, you can't really tell everyone to leave Australia because that's really not nice. But, I don't think there's really much you can do, you know? There's always going to be an epidemic. As an addict myself, I know I would go to any length to find drugs. So, even if we take drugs and alcohol away from that community, they're going to find it somewhere else.

I said, earlier, how much I miss my kids. I definitely want to get them back. My plan is to have them both at home with me in the long run and I'm hoping I can have them next year. That's why I'm working hard at recovery. I can't use and be “present.” I can't do both; be a mum and use. When I'm using, I'm not a very good mum. So, I need to be clean, for the long-haul, for my kids.

And I plan to go back to The Edge and talk to those women back there, or even go back to my old high school and talk to the school community and just be like, “You know, ice sucks. I really struggled with my drug addiction but now I know there's definitely a brighter side to life.”

MITCHELL

G'day. My name's Mitchell. I'm 29 years old. I'm a recovering alcoholic and crystal meth addict. I'm currently 115 days clean and sober.

I first started using drugs around the age of 18. The reason I started using them was because my drinking was getting out of control and I thought I'd cracked the code; I discovered something that wasn't going to make me sick. But as it turned out, it gripped me a little bit harder than the alcohol did.

I suppose I'd consider myself to be a product of my environment. I grew up in a family of addiction. My mum is a heroin addict. Well, she used to be. She doesn't use heroin anymore. I'm very proud of her for that. But growing up in that type of family system is chaotic at the best of times and, despite my best efforts, I replicated the things that I saw happening around me as a child. What I was seeing was very inconsistent behaviour coming from my mother. You know, she was always up or down, or crying or maniacally happy. And, as a child, that was my normal. So, I just – I normalized the things that were going on around me.

We moved around quite a lot and it is only since coming here to CRS [Canberra

Recovery Services] that my caseworker helped me realise we were getting kicked out of our houses every six months to a year or something like that. So, we were just never, never settled and my home life was always very chaotic and confronting. There was a lot of violence, too. My mother wasn't with my father. She was obviously a dependent addict, so the men she had in her life were all drug dealers. They very violent towards her. It was really disturbing, some of the states I saw my mother in sometimes. I'm proud to say that's one thing that I didn't take with me into my adult life.

I was in constant fight or flight mode. You know, I didn't know whether or not everything was going to be okay when I got home, whether or not mum was going to be happy, whether or not her boyfriend at the time was going to be there, shouting, screaming, smashing the place up. They were violent to me as well; very violent.

And I didn't understand it entirely, you know. I didn't understand the full picture. I didn't know my mum was struggling with addiction, but I heard my grandmother accuse her of being a drug addict pretty regularly. I never really understood it until I started to struggle with my own addiction. I was

always under the impression that she had a choice; that she chose drugs and these horrible men over me and my little sister. I was very confused.

I had my first drink when I was 12 years old. Before that, I always felt really disconnected and on the outer as a child. What happened when I had my first drink was that it's like I felt like I became the person I thought I was meant to be. So, from there on, I just – I drank for that effect. From then on, I drank as often as I could steal my mum's wine. I think it's just "monkey see, monkey do." I was unconsciously repeating the behaviour I grew up around. I drank as often as I could possibly get at it. It was probably only once a week. I wasn't drinking 'alcoholically' then, but my state of mind was definitely obsessive. I was always obsessing over when my next drink was going to come.

During my teen years, I stopped connecting with the people I'd considered to be my friends before I started drinking, and I found like-minded people – you know, unhealthy people who were drinking, drugging and just getting wild on the weekends. What that did for me was it took me out of myself and it gave me that small window where I didn't have to think about everything that

was going on at home. I think, also, I was using it for a social lubricant because I've always felt different and I've never had much confidence or self-worth because of the environment I grew up in, and because of never being able to settle. So, it helped me, at the time, to connect with people.

My drinking eventually progressed to a really bad level. It was making me sick. I was drinking every day by the time I was 18. I was throwing up blood and I was getting the shakes and DTs and all those things. I had a fiancée at the time. She told me she was going to leave me if I didn't stop drinking. So, I went to my first AA meeting when I was 18 and it was absolutely horrible. So, instead of drinking, I switched to drugs. I started using ecstasy on the weekends and that progressed to speed to cocaine, and, eventually, to smoking ice.

I was 20 when I first started smoking ice. It was with a girl. As I said, I used to suffer with very low self-worth and not much confidence. I've always hated who I am – or who I thought I was. Ice made me feel like a completely different person; it gave me confidence, yeah. Suddenly, I had all these ridiculous things to say. I was interesting, I was funny, I was charismatic – and that is something I've never been. Eventually, for a little while, it worked. I did it nearly every weekend for about a year with the boys from work, with my small group of friends who we used with. At that time, we thought it was glamorous, you know? We thought we

were non-conformists, doing crazy things on the weekends, going out and having a good time. But eventually the weekends began to get too big and I had to save a little bit for Monday, and then Monday turned into Tuesday and then it just... within a really short period of time it was every day use and I couldn't function without it.

At that time I was working in the removalist industry. There's this saying that we had: "Blue-collared 'tweakers' [meth addicts] make the world go around." And, you know, at that time in my life, I really believed it. There was nobody on my crew that either wasn't high or drinking while we were at work.

After a while, I started injecting. That's when things changed really dramatically, really quickly. I stopped being able to function like everybody else and the only thing that I would ever think about or ever get up for was that next shot. It's a different sensation – injecting ice. It's a different rush and it's a lot quicker in the delivery to the body, or the brain. I don't know whether or not I'm just impatient or if I thrive on instant gratification, but yeah. I remember my first shot. It wasn't something I *wanted* to do. I had a lot of fear around it, but I did it to fit in. I did it with a girl because she was doing it, and I didn't want to be left out. The only way I can describe it is like it's the drug equivalent of a really intense spiritual awakening. You can feel it everywhere in your body all at once. And, yeah, I thought it turned me into somebody

that was better – a better lover, a better friend, a better person – but really, it took all that away from me.

Everybody started to catch on to what was going on. I couldn't keep up appearances while I was injecting. And, you know, it took my ability to work away from me and my ability to function like a normal human being. Really quickly, I became a homeless, using addict. By that time, I was living down in Albury-Wodonga amongst a lot of really nasty people, living in some really nasty places, doing horrible things to each other just to get their next hit.

I remember when I realised I wanted to change what was happening around me. Going back over it, I can remember it pretty vividly. I was sitting in someone's garage. I'd just had a shot and this thought ran through my head that, afterwards, scared the shit out of me. I realised I was almost content with the way my life was at that point, and that really scared me. I realised I had to do something. I spoke to the social worker at Centrelink because I wasn't happy with my life at that point and it was starting to scare me. And she suggested that I give a detox centre a call. So, I did. At that point I think it had been a couple of years since I'd seen anybody in my family or anybody that I grew up with. So, you know, really quickly after that – having nowhere to go and nowhere to start from – I went back to my family and they helped me get into detox at William Booth House in Sydney.

when I'm in active addiction –
I've got no choice about what
comes next. It's a compulsion.
It's not a choice.

That unfolded with a lot of hesitation and resistance. I was really, really scared of the step that I was about to take because I had no idea what came next. And because of the fact I was so dependent on crystal [meth] for so long, I'd forgotten how to live without it. I got clean, yeah. I got clean, but I didn't... I didn't get happy. I didn't get... you know, I didn't get recovery by any stretch of the imagination. But yeah, I managed to get myself into a rehab.

To me, 'clean time' is just abstinence. It's the time between you and the last time you used or drank alcohol. And recovery is something entirely different. It's something that you've got to work for. It's a daily program and it's a way of life. It's in your mind, your body, and your spirit, you know? They say recovery is an inside job and I believe it.

I was probably there for 90 days. And I didn't do much work on myself, my *internal* self. I stopped using and drinking for 90 days, I started going to meetings and I started to hear a little bit of this message that people were talking about at meetings. And that was enough to, sort of, plant the seed – to give me this little spark of hope. But then, that 'little spark of hope' got mixed up with my addict mentality and I convinced myself I was cured. They say this is the only disease that convinces you you don't have it and that's exactly what happened. I walked out of rehab after 90 days thinking everything was going to be okay and searching for something outside of

myself. I had this blurry image of what life was meant to look like from what I heard in the rehab rooms. And what I heard in the rooms was, "If you hang around long enough, you'll start to get the 'gifts of recovery.'" But I was still very immature at that point and I thought the "gifts of recovery" were everything that makes you look good. So, I thought, if I've got a nice car, flash clothes, a nice watch, a missus, a kid – a couple of kids – a house and a good job, then I must be okay.

Really quickly after I left rehab I went looking for those things. And I got them too. I got them all within a couple of weeks of leaving. I convinced my grandfather that I was okay. He runs a building company and he put me on, so, I was working for him six days a week, 12 hours a day. And I got the girl that I had a crush on since I was about 15 or 16. By that point in my life, she'd already had two kids, but that was okay with me because I got this instant little family. And on the outside, it all looked really happy and healthy. But I was kidding myself. I was walking around with a whole heap of self-deception that I had absolutely no awareness of. And I didn't know, until I was in the relationship, that I'd got into a relationship with another addict, another intravenous using meth addict. So, we had the pressure of trying to keep each other clean – not trying to get recovery for ourselves – but trying to keep each other clean. That toxic co-dependent shit that goes on. Then there were the pressures of having two

children and going to work every day – just the pressures of normal life that I had absolutely no idea how to handle because I hadn't been a part of normal life for a very long time. They got to me.

Probably about two weeks into the relationship – about a month after I left rehab – I started drinking again. My partner wasn't a drinker, so she got right up me about that and I thought I had a really good idea. I thought, "You know what? I'll show you. I'll go and have a big shot of ice."

As I said before, injecting ice robs me of the ability to be a human and to function normally. It robs me of the ability to care about other people. I become very self-centred very quickly, and I threw everything away just to get my next hit. I sold my truck to get my next hit. I sold all the tools I'd just bought. She kicked me out, but I'd sold my truck, so I didn't even have a truck to live in. Within a week of me using again, my grandfather caught on because I didn't show up to work. Nobody had seen me for a week, so I lost my job as well. Within a week of relapsing I was, once again, a homeless using addict.



I turned to crime. It wasn't something I aspired to do. It wasn't something I wanted to do. It was something I *had* to do – something I was taught by the people around me and the people I used with. I was just doing really petty robberies – stealing wallets and phones and going through people's letterboxes to find cards. I didn't use the cards because I don't think I've got the capacity to do anything like that, but I swapped them for drugs.

I tried to get clean again because – it's really funny – recovery wrecks you using. I didn't have much recovery after that 90 days at rehab, but I had that little bit of hope and that little bit of experience of recovery. And yeah, the pain, the internal pain that I struggled with after relapsing forced me back into recovery because I couldn't keep it up for very long. After the relapse, I tried to get away again. I did a 'geographical.' I went up to the Newcastle area and I put

myself in a bridge program up there, the Dooralong Transformation Centre. I went pretty well out there for a little while. I did the entire program. I graduated after eight months. And on the whole, I stayed clean probably about 13 months. That's the longest I've been clean.

I stayed clean for 13 months by doing the absolute bare minimum. I showed up to group. I got my name ticked off the roll and I went to meetings and, I don't know, just by like "osmosis," I started to get a little bit well. But then after these things happen, and you stay clean for a little while, you start to plateau at a certain point and the way to get over that really is to put a little bit of work in and start doing the steps and I didn't do that.

Ever since then, I've sort of been relapsing and stopping, and you know, in and out of NA (Narcotics Anonymous) and AA and really struggling with direction and purpose. And, you know, one of the signs of an addict is somebody that's doing a geographical – a geographical is me trying to get away from my problems by moving town. You don't realise at the time that *you* are the problem, or the problem's *in you* and you just take it with you.

Eventually I ended up in Canberra, chasing some work, some really good work – another opportunity that I ruined. And that relapse lasted for about two years and it got worse than ever before.

Up until last year, I was the only bloke in my family that could say I'd never been

Hilary Wardhaugh, Mitchell, On Thin Ice, 2019, Digital image.

to jail and I was really proud of that, you know. But I made some pretty shonky decisions in my last relapse and, I ended up in the Alex Maconochie Centre. It wasn't for a crime – well, it was for a crime, but it wasn't like a robbery or anything like that. It was a really poor choice made by a really unwell man at the time. I had a girlfriend and we were both using together and she'd just had a miscarriage and I found out that night. I decided to drink two bottles of rum, have a really big shot of ice, and go for a drive. I didn't get very far. I was on the Monaro Highway, probably going about 200 and I rolled my car about three times. I got out without a scratch on me. That's "higher power" stuff right there! And I went down, off the side of the road, and fell asleep in the bush. The police picked me up at 2 o'clock in the morning. At that time, I didn't have a licence, the car was unregistered, I blew 0.64 and I had an illegal drug in my system. So, that was it. And that wasn't my first drink or drug driving. So, you know, I'm a bit of a repeat offender in that sense.

I went to prison for about a month, which was really lucky, because when I got in there, it wasn't exactly a very nice place. There were a lot of unwell people with really serious addictions and no direction or purpose in life – that's not a place that I'd like to be again.

Something I feel pretty passionate about is the way ice users are stigmatised. I think that society as a whole has a really warped idea of what an ice addict is. It's

really upsetting because, you know, I'm an ice addict and I'm discovering that I'm not all that bad. The way society views ice addicts is really scary. We're made out to be uncontrollable, impulsive psychopaths with crazy violent tendencies and, you know, we're all criminals and all these things. It's really upsetting because we're not. We're just people.

Things really need to change because while we're still punishing addicts for their addictive behaviour, and shaming them, and giving them criminal records, and taking their children from them just because they use, and incarcerating them, we're putting barriers between them and their recoveries. We're persecuting them for something they've got no choice over because I know when I use – when I'm in active addiction – I've got no choice about what comes next. It's a compulsion. It's not a choice. I can remember times in active addiction where I was injecting and crying at the same time because it was almost like I was literally using against my own will. I fucking hated myself.

After 30 days in jail, I got out on bail. A part of my bail condition is that I need to serve three intensive corrections orders (ICOS); they are like a sentence in society. So, I'm serving three ICOs and they go for six months each. I was still using and drinking at the time and I know that, when I'm using, I can't provide a clean urine sample. And, because I'd had a little bit of recovery and sobriety before, I knew the only way I was going

to be able to get ahead of this stuff was if I put myself back into a program.

I've been here, at the Salvation Army Recovery Centre, for 115 days. I'm actually pretty confident this time. Things aren't just happening "on the surface" any more. I'm not focusing on what's outside of myself. I'm doing a lot of internal work. I'm identifying a lot of my past shit and my character defects and my old behaviours and I'm making the choice to make a change. I've never done that before. It's great, but it's the most uncomfortable experience I've ever been through in my life. It's the hardest rehab I've been in yet. A lot of the reason why I do the things I do is because of what happened to me in my childhood – the environment I grew up in and the traumas I've experienced in my life. I'd never addressed that before. Coming here and actually doing what's asked of me and putting in the work and taking a look at my own shit – it's really horrible and really uncomfortable, but it's so worth it, you know. Sometimes I kick myself for not doing it earlier.

One of the 12 promises of AA and NA is that situations that previously baffled us will become easier. I think that's my favourite promise because I struggle in normal everyday life. I've been on drugs for literally half my life – like, 14 years of drinking and drugging. That's how I function; that's how I've always functioned. This program is teaching me to be a human again.



Tom Buckland,
Mitchell – Epiphany, 2019,
Found objects, cardboard.



Tom Buckland,
Ann - When You're There, 2019,
Found objects, cardboard.



Jess Higgins,
Fallen (detail), 2019,
Woodblock.



Jess Higgins,
Fallen, 2019,
Woodblock.

ANN

My name is Ann. I was on ice for about a year, 12 years ago. At the time I was 26 years old.

Like most people, the story of my addiction is quite a complex one with many layers. What happened was that I'd actually just moved to Melbourne. I wanted to get away from Canberra for a while. But it was much harder to get a job interstate than I thought. So, I got really stressed. I'm a good hairdresser and I had a really big clientele base in Canberra. But when I went down there, no one would hire me part-time or full-time. They'd be like, "Oh, just come in and get commission." So, while you're doing that, you don't have money. I just kept thinking: "Where am I going to find money for the rent? What am I going to do?"

That stress built up over six months. It just got too much. I've always been a really high-functioning addict and had substance abuse issues anyway prior to that. I was still drinking, smoking, smoking weed, doing all that sort of stuff. But before I moved to Melbourne, I'd never taken ice.

I met James because I was buying stuff for the salon that I was at and we just started hanging out. He later became

my partner and I moved in with him. We used to smoke so much weed and I think I was just not really present in my own life, if that makes sense. So, I didn't actually really even think about it [taking ice for the first time] and it wasn't even really a big deal.

But I do remember the first time I took it because it was more euphoric than I thought; you feel like you're thinking really clearly. You feel confident and like you could conquer the world. I became addicted fairly quickly because immediately, I thought: "I want to feel like that again."

We were smoking it every day before work and then a few more times a day too. The euphoric feeling lessens and so you do end up needing to take more and more to get a similar sensation. The house where we were living was so dodgy – full of other ice addicts. There were about seven people in that house but I didn't really pay rent. And I thought: "I can spend all of my wage on ice." That was my priority at that point.

In our bedroom there was a mattress on the floor and we had a TV in there. Always a bong next to the bed and rubbish on the floor. It would have stank.

In the kitchen there was just like piles of mouldy dishes everywhere. No one would take out the rubbish. Pretty gross. Fights would break out between people sometimes. I saw James just kinghit someone once.

When I look back on it now, it [ice] seemed to be the best medicine ever for the unresolved issues that I've got from my childhood. Growing up my stepfather was very violent. And there was also emotional abuse and neglect in the house. I suppose that's the reason I started smoking weed so young too – at about 13 years old. Now I think about my own kids and it seems very young. But at the time it was quite rational. Like you've got people yelling and screaming and punching things in the other room and drugs have just always been an escape from the daily crap [like that].

I ended up working really young – at about 15 years old – so I could get out of that house and my younger siblings moved in with me. I had bulimia as well when I was about 16. And I think that was just a control thing because I didn't have any control over my life. And so, that all just sort of adds up. I've always had massive self-esteem issues.



Martin Ollman, Ann, On Thin Ice, 2019. Digital image.

The catalyst for leaving the situation in Melbourne with James was that I found out I was pregnant. I can't believe that happened because I only weighed 48 kilos at that time and was so unhealthy. When I saw the two lines on the pregnancy test, I was like: "Holy shit." Then I thought, "I either have to have an abortion or get off the drugs."

I just thought, it's my choice if I want to screw my own life up, but no kid ever asks for that. Because I was raised in not a very nice situation, it was important to me not to bring another kid into that. I want my kid to have a better life. I decided to move back to Canberra. James was furious. He already had another kid that he didn't see and didn't want another child. We had a huge fight and I just left.

I moved back in with my mum and stepfather. I didn't have anywhere else to go, but at least then the drugs and stuff weren't around me. I went cold turkey and that was horrible. Just horrible. Yeah. I remember my legs, I got the worst restless legs, cried pretty much like in non-stop for about a month. I pretty much just shut myself in the house. I remember just watching a lot of daytime TV and eating and sleeping a lot.

I transformed my life – but it was really gradually. Once you sort of consciously make a good decision, you can then make another good decision and it does start to get better. So, it was almost like a good upward spiral instead of a bad downward spiral.

To anyone struggling with addiction I'd say, "It's really fucking hard, but it can get better...be kind to yourself."

With my current partner, Ethan, we'd known each other since we were about 20. We dated a few times in our younger years but the timing was never right. Then he got back in touch with me randomly when my baby, Eva, was about a month old. First of all, we were just friends but within about six months, because I was a single mum, he said: "Just come and live with me." And so, that actually helped.

He didn't mind that I had a baby. He just always wanted a family and just always treated her like his daughter. But then that's why we eventually decided to have the second child too.

I'm proud of the life I've built now and the life we've built together. My life is colourful and happy. I have my own successful hairdressing business and can enjoy the little things now – like going for a little walk and you notice a flower. I love gardening and just being outside on a nice, sunny day. While I still have a lot of mental health issues and addiction issues – I smoke pot on weekends – I've seen numerous psychologists and psychiatrists in order to deal with all the childhood stuff.

Martin Ollman, Ann, On Thin Ice, 2019. Digital image.



James hasn't been so lucky. He's still addicted to ice. He's still struggling with [keeping] jobs and aggression. He's been to jail three times, I think, in the last 10 years. I just feel sorry for him but I'm glad I'm not in that life anymore.

To anyone struggling with addiction I'd say, "It's really fucking hard, but it can get better...be kind to yourself."

NICOLE

My name's Nicole and I'm 35 years of age. I started using ice when I was 30.

I was with my ex-fiancé, who was an alcoholic. I was working two jobs and looking after my eldest daughter. I was smoking weed every day quite heavily – if I didn't have it, I couldn't cope. And then I met the father of my two youngest girls. He was doing ice, but I didn't know that then; I didn't know what ice was.

I walked in on him in his garage one night and he quickly hid the glass pipe. So, I just made out that I knew what it was. I thought it was speed. I pretended to know what it was and then I got addicted from there. It's a moreish drug. The more you want, the more you take, the more you take, the more you want – and then it just went from there.

I guess it was out of curiosity that I wanted to try it. Ice and heroin were probably the only drugs I hadn't tried – that's so bad. Heroin's the only drug I still haven't tried because I don't like needles. So, with the ice, it was curiosity and this guy (who later fathered my two youngest children) explained it to me that it was like speed, just better. And that's what got me to because I really enjoyed my speed while I had it, and the same with coke. So, I thought it would

be just like those – a party drug. I didn't know it would be as addictive as it turned out to be.

Using ice is like having sex or drinking a whole heap of Red Bulls. It gives you a buzz of energy where you just want to do 500 things at once. You're all of a sudden happy and the depression is lifted – like nothing bothers you. I'm a social person by nature anyway, but my socialising skills came out even more when I was on ice. What I did straight, it enhanced that when I was high. So, I was just on the go, like the Energizer bunny.

Taking ice didn't replace my other addiction – I still continued with my weed. My ice was my upper and my weed was my downer. When I had enough of being awake on the ice, then the weed would help me come down less psychotically, so to speak. The ice would be my energizer during the day, and then when I was coming off the ice, I would smoke the weed. It was able to put me to sleep and I would sleep off the ice drug while the weed was doing its job. I used to smoke it before work, during work and after work and then it would help put me to sleep. So, while the ice was wearing off, the weed would do its job on my mind.

And yeah, it was really expensive. But both my new partner and I were working. I was working two jobs and he was working a full-time job when I met him and I was working full-time plus my parents owned a pub, so I was working there. Still, I don't know how we did it. We had a private rental, and I was looking after my eldest daughter. He was drinking. He's an alcoholic. And, every two days, I smoked probably about half a gram to a gram of weed. I'd go through about a gram of ice every two days. So, yeah, in the beginning, it seemed manageable, but in the end, it just turned to shit.

Then I got pregnant. She was what we call an "ice baby." She, and our second daughter, were created while we were both on ice. I quit ice. I didn't smoke while I was pregnant with our first daughter, my five-year-old. But he kept going. He ended up in a psychiatric ward due to his excessive ice smoking. Then, with my last child, I didn't even know I was pregnant until I was six months along. I was smoking quite heavily still and didn't realise. I was scared I was going to cause disabilities or something like that because I didn't know what ice does to people who are pregnant. And I

was still smoking my weed. I've got three kids – I smoked weed through all three of my pregnancies.

About three years ago, my partner lost his licence due to drink driving. So, he spiralled. Our relationship just went downhill as soon as he lost his licence. He became violent and the more he drank and the more ice he used, the more of a different person he became. We split up and then, one night, I asked him to leave my house. He wouldn't leave. We got into a big physical fight and my five-year-old daughter witnessed it. He ended up breaking my nose and he got locked up for it – obviously. That's the main reason why my kids were moved out of my care. It was due to domestic violence; to them being exposed to domestic violence.

My drug use wasn't the problem. They had no problem with me smoking. They had no idea I was on the ice at this time and, obviously, I didn't tell them. I was – well I thought I was – managing. Obviously, I wasn't. I was trying to look after my youngest child: breastfeed her, bottle feed her, every two to three hours. And then I would go to bed by 4am without any drugs. So, then I used to use ice, thinking it would help me cope by doing the cleaning and all that sort of crap you do when your kids are asleep and then help me function the next day. Actually, it was deteriorating me more but, then, I thought it was helping me more.

As long I was awake and functioning I thought I was coping. I thought that was all I needed to do. I thought I was coping fine, but the more I smoked and the more I got high on both drugs, the less patience I had. I'm a short-tempered person by nature, but the drugs brought it out even more. I didn't realise that. My temper exploded more quickly. If there was something that didn't go my way I'd get really cranky and snap at the drop of a hat, but my anger was aimed at my parents and friends – I didn't take it out on the kids.

I'm OCD, so I'm a clean freak. So, if you came to my house, you had to abide my rules and if you didn't, then you got kicked out. I was very vocal about that. My psychiatrist said to me that since what happened to me with my ex – the way he abused me – my temper is shorter towards men than it ever was before. So, I'd snap a lot quicker. I'd yell at them. I'd verbally abuse them. Everyone that came to my house had to abide by my rules and they were clean themselves. So, there was no [intravenous] drug use; no needle using on my premises. They weren't allowed to come and, you know, "use me" for anything – even though I was oblivious to the fact that, in the end, they were. But I had my rules in place to protect myself in that respect.

My five-year-old, my middle child, took on a lot of what was going on then. I had a lot of problems with her when my youngest was born. She poured dishwashing liquid down her throat at

one point. And she used to flick her sister over in her bouncy all the time. So, trying to deal with that while only having two hours of sleep while being high? I thought I was functioning, but I could feel my temper getting shorter and shorter. The wick was burning closer to the dynamite, and then it exploded.

It was very hard. After DOCS took the kids, I didn't get out of bed for six weeks. I didn't sleep, I didn't eat. That's where my drug, the weed, was my saviour. I eventually got some courage to have a friend go get some for me. They brought it over and that helped me get my appetite back and, of course, it helped me to sleep. Without that, I don't think I'd be here.

And I was still using ice. My addiction to ice just got worse. It went from being my "energizer-drink" drug to my "happy-go-lucky" drug. It made me happier; it made me, sort of, less stressed about things – able to deal with things. I was just happier, yeah.

I used all the spare money I had on drugs. Up to the point I lost my kids, I was on a single parent pension, so you get about \$1200 a fortnight on that. And then I was living in a domestic violence house run by St. Vincent De Paul. And I had friends who were, I guess back then, ice addicts. When I first started they were kind and sharing, compared to the way they are now – selfish and thieving. Then, it didn't take as much to get me high compared to what it used to in the end.

After I left the domestic violence shelter, I'd gone back to the house I'd been living in with my kids. But, of course, the kids weren't there any more. It ended up becoming, I guess you'd say, the "drug house" where people just rock up randomly, smoke their ice, and borrow what-have-you. They knew I was awake at all hours. So, it was like I ended up becoming the – what would I call it – the homeless shelter for single ice addicts. I get along better with men than women, so a lot of the men would come around. As soon as their relationships broke down or they got kicked out of their house, they'd come to my house and I'd take them in and look after them while we smoked our ice.

I couldn't open my two kids' bedrooms for months after I went back to that house. As soon as I opened the door, just the memories of them being there was ... oh, it was horrible. I couldn't function. It was very hard for me. It would just give me an instant heart attack – sort of palpitations. I used to hyperventilate. I'd break down. When my friends moved in, one of the men took my daughters' room, and we had to move all their stuff out. That helped me remember they weren't dead; that they were still alive. Having my friends move in helped me. It was my way of coping, I guess: the busier I was, the higher I was, the less I was on my own, the less I had to think about the reality of what I'd got myself into.

But now, I realise I can't be a good mum to my kids unless I'm being a better person to myself.

Eventually, I lost that house due to my ice addiction. St Vincent de Paul kicked me out. I couldn't afford the rent anymore, or pay the bills. My using just got worse and I didn't give a crap about anything after that. I went from there to live with another ice smoker. That deteriorated me even more because my stuff got flogged and messed around with when I was out. And I was very rarely home because I used to drive my dealer around to pay for my ice habit. And I used to do his washing – his laundry – to help with that as well. The more I was out, the more this chick would just take all my shit. I was there for about three weeks and then I moved from there to another house with another ice addict, and then to the caravan park at Fyshwick.

I applied to the Salvation Army Recovery Centre in Fyshwick, in November. I had to wait until the April just gone and, while I was waiting, I was living in the caravan park. If I hadn't applied when I did, I don't think I'd be here. Because of my temper and my using, I think I'd be in jail. In here, they say anger is just a feeling, but that anger was important to my survival. Because I'm a female, and I'm little, most

men didn't take what I said to heart; they didn't take it on-board until I was screaming at them.

I went from living in my own house – with my kids and after my kids – for five years. And then in a period of from November last year until now, I lived in two ice addicts' houses before moving to the Fyshwick Caravan Park. So that's just six months for my life to really fall apart. Towards the end of it, I didn't really give a shit so long as I had a roof over my head. I had another chick from here take me to my old residence to get some of my belongings and she was shocked at what I used to live in – just a trailer park of trash.

I called the Recovery Centre myself. My initial reason was to prove to the courts that I could be straight and responsible enough to look after my kids myself. But now, I realise I can't be a good mum to my kids unless I'm being a better person to myself. I've still got a lot of that person who lived in a trailer park of trash and didn't give a shit about anything left in me. I still have a lot of anger. I've only been here since 2 April and I've been off the ice since 29 March, so I haven't been here long. I've got a long way to go in my recovery, but I'm having domestic violence counselling because I've been in a lot of violent relationships. So, I'm coming out of the dark tunnel that I was in for so long and I'm starting to see the light at the end of it. I guess I'm starting to see the rainbow, if that makes

sense. I can see that I am slowly doing a turnaround for the better, for myself and for my kids. But there's a long way to go.

After I stopped using, I was sleeping a lot. Until you're off it, you don't realise how much ice takes out of you, physically and mentally, because it's like being an alcoholic. They just replace, top it up, top it up, top it up. It's the same with ice, you just top up, top up. At first, one point (.10g) is enough to get you high and then you need two and then you need three.

And then you need a half a gram and then you need a gram and then, the next minute, you're smoking every half-hour. So, then you need an ounce and it just goes up and up and up and up and up.

It's only in the last month or so I've realised the havoc it did to my mentality. Your self-worth just deteriorates. I'm on antidepressants at the moment. I'm slowly rebuilding all that back in my brain because, you know, I only smoked for four years but, in that time, I smoked as much as most people would in 10 years. I caused a lot of havoc to my mental and my physical well-being, but I'm slowly rebuilding.

It's only been in the last month or so I've started to adjust to the program here at the rehab. I think with the attitude I had when I first came here, I was still high. So, I still had the egotistical side of me thinking "my own shit don't stink." So you know, I thought, "Screw the court, screw you, ex, I'm going to dig you in the ground." But, as I've gotten straighter

and succumbed more to the program, I realised I have to do it for myself otherwise I'm no good as a human. I'm no good as a mum to my kids, from the heart. Before that, I was just going with the flow. Like, as I say, "fake it until you make it" type of thing. I wasn't really interested. At first, I was only in detox because I needed to do the right thing for the courts and for my kids' sake. It's only been in the last month that I'm here to do it for myself.

I guess I've progressed through different levels in the program to where I am now. Now I see that, if I don't become mentally well for myself, and become a good, confident person for myself, then I'm no good as a role model for my kids; no good for my kids as a mum at all. And they need a strong mum – like my five-year-old used to have before. My five-year-old briefly saw me on the ice, but that was nothing compared to what she had to witness in the end. The mum I want to be is the mum I used to be to my oldest daughter – my 15-year-old. You know, the happy-go-lucky Mum. I can live life without drugs. I did it for many years beforehand. It's just going to take a long time to get there, I think.

My kids are living with my parents now. And that's only by chance. The day they were being taken, Child Protective Services rang my mum who was just about to leave to go see her father in Harden, so it's simply absolutely by chance that she was there to take them.

I see them on a Sunday once a fortnight for four hours, which is not enough, nowhere near enough. My five-year-old remembers the house we lived in together, but my three-year-old doesn't. She doesn't know anything except my mum's house. She was taken when she was nine-months-old. After she was taken, I only saw my youngest daughter grow up through the visits and stuff.

As a mum, being without your kids is horrible. I did jail for a month for drug-driving a couple of years ago, and my kids weren't allowed to see me. My mum wouldn't bring my kids to the jail, and I understood that. Not having my kids hurts me, and it has fucked me up in so many ways – more than I could ever imagine. For a long time I blamed my ex for it because I thought he was the sole reason they were taken. I said, "It was not the drug use, it was the domestic violence." It took me a while to realise that the drug use led to the domestic violence. Initially, I thought I was doing the right thing by my kids the night it happened. But if I had made the right decisions, without the drugs, then I wouldn't be here and my kids would still be with me. So, it's taken me two years to realise that I need to put steps in place to get my kids back. Before that, I was in denial.

It's taken me a long time to get to this point of realising I have to recover for myself simply because I blamed Child Protective Services, I blamed

my ex, I blamed the cops, I blamed the sheriff, I blamed everybody in my life. I thought because I was looking after my two kids on my own I was functioning fine, when really I wasn't. I guess, except when I was asleep, I was high all the time. But then, I reasoned that I never got high around my kids – I always got high after they went to bed. That's how insane I was. I thought that was the "manageable" part of my life – where they didn't see all that crap. But it was probably only about a year ago that my five-year-old stopped asking questions about her daddy hurting me because she saw what he did. And what scared me the most was that my recognition of who he was when he attacked me – so high and so drunk – was not how he saw himself, in his eyes. He doesn't remember it like that at all.

In the beginning, I took no responsibility. Like I said, I blamed my ex and everyone else for the situation, not myself. But if I had been more level-headed in my brain and more sane – as in not having any drugs on me – he never would have been allowed in my house to begin with, which is how it happened. I initially asked him to come over and fix the car. That's how he got there. And my five-year-old (at the time) wanted to see her father. So I thought I was doing the right thing by my kids, you know, but in the end, I wasn't. I asked him to leave as soon as I knew he was pissed. And then that's when the fight – the argument – started. I tried to get away from him and it deteriorated

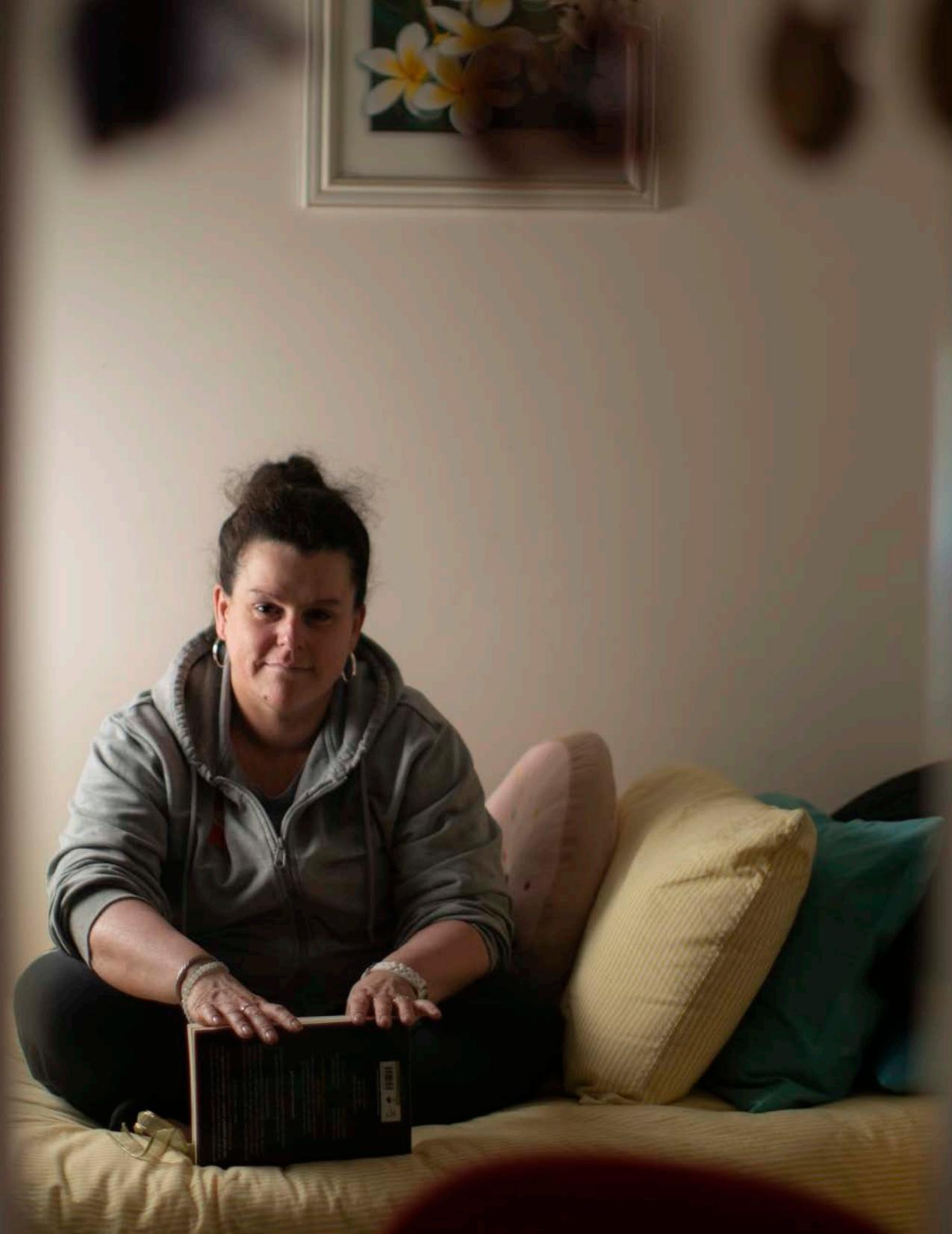
from there. But if we both hadn't been high, and if I hadn't allowed him in the house, it wouldn't have escalated like that.

At the moment, child protective services are putting 18-year orders in place for my kids to be resided with my parents. That means that, for their safety, they will stay with my parents until they're 18, unless their father or I go before the court and prove we're able to be sufficiently good parents to have our children in our care. At the moment, their father is fighting the 18-year order. He wants restoration to him in the two-year period. But I'm not fighting it because I believe my kids are better off where they are. There's no guarantee that he or I will not relapse in that two-year period and, if that happens, then they'll have to do the whole roundabout again and that will just fuck them up even more. It took them until now to fully settle with my parents, including psychologically, and I don't want to fuck them up again. I'd rather them be in a safe environment now and know that they can come back to mommy later, because I'm going to be here for, maybe, another eight to 10 months. I don't really know how long I'll be here for. Their father's in another rehab program, so he doesn't know either. He thinks by going into their halfway house program he will be fit enough to have my children, but I disagree because he just... he can't look after himself and I can't look after myself.

There's no guarantee we'll be able to look after our children in two years' time. No one can see into the future. So when, and if, that time comes, my parents are happy for that to happen but, in the meantime, they both agree with me that neither he nor I are not responsible enough to have them in our care right now.

It's taken me a while to see it this way. I was a mum at a young age. I had my first child when I was 19 which meant I had to grow up quite quickly. I guess you'd say I'm one of the lucky ones in that, with the domestic violence, I saw the bad side of ice early on in my addiction, otherwise I'd probably be using needles right now.

In rehab, they try and say that addiction stems from your family, but I disagree. Mine stemmed from wanting to fit in with other people. In the end, it was a shield – a mask – to cover up the reality that my life wasn't really a life. I just thought it was a life. Look, being an ice addict is not a life. You lose everything. Everybody I know who's on ice has lost their licence, their house, their car, their belongings, their possessions, their kids, their partner, their family. I don't think I've met one ice addict that hasn't. And then the "gifts of recovery," as they call it, start coming around. My parents are talking to me happily again. They're lending me money again, whereas before they wouldn't do that because they knew it went straight to drugs. My 15-year-old and I are slowly building up another relationship. The main thing I've learnt here, I guess, is



Hilary Wardhaugh, Nicole, On Thin Ice, 2019, Digital Image.

My vivid imagination expands now. I can get lost in my book now and it helps me better than getting lost in my drugs.

that there is a better life outside doing drugs and alcohol. It teaches you to deal with reality in life without having to put a mask on it with drugs or alcohol. It helps you to deal with that. You know – to live. They say you live by life example or live life on life's chance. That's what they say.

As an ice addict, I've been judged. Because I have a few teeth missing, a lot of people assume that's from the ice, when really that's from with my ex. It's from a long time ago. My teeth just started to deteriorate. And, as all parents know, having kids takes the most calcium out of your teeth. So, I've been judged that way and I guess being called a junkie is probably the number one thing because you get hollow cheeks, and that's what I have. The media has been very blasé in demonising ice addicts. Ice doesn't turn a person hypo – running at you and killing you all like a wolf person or a zombie or anything like that. Like, I know probably a minute amount of people who can still manage their lives to a certain degree whilst they're on ice – they either have a job or they still have a house, they have kids, they have a car. People couldn't understand – other ice

addicts couldn't understand – why I still had possessions when I was an ice addict. In the end, I was able to, you know, hang onto a point or two and make it last me, as opposed to smoking everything and licking the bag, like I used to. The way the media portrays it is very, very black and white. There's more to it than that.

Weed used to be demonised the same way. Back in the day, I remember seeing the ads on TV where, in a country town, a chick is sitting by herself and her friends were over in another area and the ad saying, "Don't touch weed, it isolates you and deems you unsociable." Ice, to me, is in that same category.

I don't know. It's like, to me, junkies are not just people who inject any more. Junkies are ice addicts too. Sure, some of them will kill your mother to get to the money you have in your safe. My house was robbed and I wasn't even a dealer. But, it's not the drug, it's the person who takes it. If you are already mentally disturbed in the head, it's going to bring that out even more. It emphasises ten-times more what you're already doing in normal life.

But, obviously, I want to say to people, "Don't do it." Easier said than done, but it's not a pretty life. It's not a good life. Nobody wants to be in a rehab with nothing to their name. I know nobody in here does. For me, it's an ugly "blessing in disguise" because, without the drugs, I wouldn't have gone through this

experience and re-discovered a side of myself that I used to have. The number one rule in life though is, "Don't do it." But if you end up smoking ice and you've lost everything and you feel there's no hope out there, you need to call a rehab and get in there, and they'll help you discover who you used to be before the drugs killed your life.

I have a lot more hope for the future than I had six months ago. Six months ago, all I cared the fuck about was my next – where I'm getting my next point from. No sooner did I get it, I wanted to get more. And now, I'm looking at a new life, of having a house again, and having my kids back, and just the normal, everyday shit I used to enjoy without drugs – which is nothing, but, you know, it's a lot more than what I've had.

I can sit and read a book now and enjoy it, which I couldn't, before. I was always agitated and, having OCD, the ice brought that out even more. So, I'd be cleaning and scrubbing things off the walls. That's not a life. I'm reading a Rizzoli and Isles detective book by Tess Gerritsen. It's very in-depth. I like my thrillers and my murders. I'm pretty dark like that, but yeah, I'm a very imaginative person, so it helps me. My vivid imagination expands now. I can get lost in my book now and it helps me better than getting lost in my drugs.

PAUL

Hi. My name is Paul. I'm 37 years old. I've been substance-free for six months. I think I've survived because there's a bigger purpose in my life. These days, I think I have a lot to offer the community, and other cancer survivors, and people in addiction, by sharing my story.

I had a very stable family upbringing. Both my parents are schoolteachers and, you know, anyone on the outside will look in and think I had a great family life. But behind closed doors, my parents argued and fought all the time. I felt disconnected from them. My mother lost her mother when I was born, so she was very disconnected from me and I – probably – I don't know – I maybe felt unloved for a lot of years.

At a young age I felt like I didn't fit in with the crowd at school. I went through puberty at a very late age. I'm 2 metres tall now, but I was always a small kid at school. I was convinced there was something wrong with me and I started smoking at school – smoking weed. And that was the way I felt like I fit in. Eventually that led to a different crowd. I wanted to do things bigger and better than everyone else, so I started hanging around with a lot of older kids that I

thought were cool, and who were using speed. And yes, *they* were doing it, so I thought, "Why not?"

I originally started using amphetamines like speed when I was about 15 but I stopped using at about 23. The ice wasn't around back then. I was about 31 when I first took ice in 2012.

I had a mole on my chest cut out in 2006, which was deemed to be melanoma. At that stage, they said if you have your check-ups and things for five years and you're clean, you're good to go. Six years later, it came back internally. I had two tumours in each lung, one on the side of the back of my heart the size of a cricket ball, two in my liver, two in my pancreas and one in my adrenal gland. I was diagnosed terminal with about three months to live.

I always joke that I knew I was going to die when Mum kissed me on the forehead and told me she loved me. I always knew she loved me, but she'd never said it. And I had an argument with a doctor, then, about how sick I really was. He said, "Why is that?" And I said, "Well, Mum just told me she loved me."

So probably after a year of chemo, I'd given up on life and was just kind of preparing to die, I suppose. It was hard, emotionally. I should have talked to people a lot earlier about it. I had my own flooring business. I had three children, a wife, a golfing career and, you know, I was probably in denial about how sick I really was.

I remember the doctor asking, "Do you want to know how long you have?"

And I said, "I'll go when I'm ready." I was adamant I was going to beat it and nothing was going to slow me down.

There were a lot of "what-ifs" – thinking about what *could* have happened. I'd been playing top-grade Pennants in Sydney and I was winning golf tournaments everywhere as an amateur. I'd thought about leaving my business and going professional – I thought perhaps my children were of an age where I could do that. I was kind of riding the peak of my goals and career then the next minute, I'm laid up in hospital 70 kilos, wringing wet, can't even get out of bed, can't walk, can barely go to the toilet by myself. And that was a really emotional battle that stripped it – it played at me for a long while. I was very negative at the world for a number of years. I still

haven't played golf since then. I've had the odd hit here and there, but I don't have the passion for it like I used to.

After a period of time, I came to accept I was terminal. I had a couple of close calls. I failed two chemotherapy treatments and the tumours inside me were getting really big. Like the one in the pancreas – I could feel it poking through the skin of my stomach at one stage. And I knew it was, you know, time.

I think my sons were about 12 and 14 or something then, and I had a one-year-old daughter. She was probably the inspiration for me to keep fighting. Without her, I probably would have given up a long time before that. My wife at the time was supportive, but she just wanted to wrap me in cotton wool and leave me at home. I just wanted to keep going and try and establish my business to leave to my older sons.

My doctor kept saying I needed to talk to a counsellor and, on the other hand, my mates would be saying, "Oh, you're a big, strong guy. You'll get through it. You know, just keep your chin up. You'll be fine." And I didn't talk to anyone. Eventually, it was just a time bomb inside me that went off. I couldn't cope anymore.

I probably started abusing pain medication first. I had an open script for oxycontin. I'd regularly have a handful of oxy's and wash them down with 12 beers and, you know, I just – I don't know – it killed the pain inside me, not only

physically, but mentally. I was regularly taking 180mg of oxy a day. It helped me function in life, I suppose. Well – it *felt* like it helped me function. Once I realised I was addicted to the oxy's, I threw them all away. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done.

But I was still working then and I was convinced I needed something like an amphetamine or an ice to help me get through day-to-day life, because of my illness. I suffered from a lot of side effects from the chemotherapy and I had a young family to support and speed was the way to get me to and from work and run my business. Like, in actual fact, my body was getting better, but I was merely getting worse. It was a bit funny – I had started obsessing about using again for a long time, and then, when I started using amphetamines and ice, I realised I'd just replaced one addiction with another.

I started dabbling in a little bit of cocaine, but I didn't have the money to use cocaine, so I started using amphetamine and speed again – I had a mate that used to sell a bit of speed on the side. But eventually, speed became hard to get. Speed, in the community, died out. I have a little brother, who is also an addict. He's a bit of a drug baron. He's currently doing his 11th year in prison. He has been using ice all his adult life. Having a brother who was an ice dealer, I eventually ended up using it and then I just had it on tap. I could literally walk from my house to his house, stick my hand out and he just... he laid me up and

I'd walk away. I think, you know, at the peak of it, I probably had a \$1,000-a-day habit, but I'd never really had to pay for it

After about 12 months, because of the severe quantity of ice I was taking, I couldn't function at all. I couldn't do anything but ice. It just fried me up. It would take me four hours to make a piece of toast in the morning. If I was trying to leave the house to do something, it would take me hours – it would take me hours just to find my shoes. I suffered an enormous amount of anxiety. You know, I was paranoid, I was losing weight, I was unhealthy. I was just, yeah, "fried out." I was just, I don't know, like my brain was just cooked. That's the only way to describe it. I just couldn't function in life anymore and my answer was taking ice. I'd have some good periods where I would use and I could get through day-to-day life and that was the justification to keep using. But, you know, that might be one day in a fortnight. The other 13 days, I'd be either sleeping or just locked in my bedroom, really. It was terrible.

My life really unravelled quickly. I stopped working and the business finally failed. My relationships with family and friends deteriorated.

When I was heavy in addiction, I was pretty much shunned by all my friends who weren't ice users and that was the majority of people who were in my life. I think there definitely is a big stigma about it. Don't get me wrong. I have



seen my little brother rip off a car door and throw it down the street in a rage, but I don't think everyone's like that. My emotions just spiral out of control on ice. I think, for me, I suffer. I'm not one of those guys you see on an ad smashing up a hospital bed or punching a nurse or something like that. I'm the guy in the corner of my bedroom with my hoody pulled over my head, crying my eyes out and wanting to commit suicide.

I lost all the friends I had at the golf club. My family was starting to, not disown me, but they were extremely concerned about what I was doing to myself. I had a relationship with a girl that broke down when she found out I was using and I was just... I just wasn't a social person anymore. My life was probably unmanageable. That's about the best way to describe it.

That was a couple of years ago. After that, I met up with another partner, a friend from school – from the local town I'm from. She was also an ice user and we really had this co-dependent using relationship where we lived together and didn't do anything much else in life, really. We'd just be living in a house and scoring drugs and staying in the house. We didn't do anything else in life.

We moved to Brisbane then to get away from it. We managed to stay clean up there for about three months and, eventually, what we'd run from in our lives caught up with us. We started using again.

I was in Brisbane when I was diagnosed with heart failure – not only from the chemotherapy I was on, but from the ice use on top. I think my heart was running at about 12 per cent. The doctor said I probably wouldn't see the next day and my kids were called up to say good-bye. Once again, it's a miracle I'm still here.

When my girlfriend and I started using in Brisbane again, our lives spiralled out of control pretty quickly. We ended up separating and she left. Over a period of three or four months we decided we needed to get into a rehab to get ourselves sorted out. We eventually went to different rehabs in Sydney and we were both still fairly "fried," as I call it. We both got discharged within a month and then, over a period of the next three months, we were both in and out of detoxes, trying to get into another facility.

She ended up in a rehab in Canberra and I didn't see her for a couple of months. Her mum finally made contact with me over Christmas and let me know where she was. I wrote her a letter. I was just relieved to know she was okay. She told me about this rehabilitation centre in Canberra – the Salvation Army Recovery Centre in Fyshwick – and that there was a chance if I came here we could at least see each other, you know – every now and then. I thought that was just an opportunity too good to refuse.

At that point, my life was spiralling out of control once again. After my marriage broke down, I was looking to pay a hefty legal fee for a solicitor to help me see my daughter. For that, and a number of other reasons, I stole a tractor. I got put on a suspended sentence for that. Then, for making contact with my ex-wife in regards to my daughter, I ended up in breach of an AVO (although there had been no violence or anything). I ended up with this intensive corrections order (ICO) from it. I was very lucky not to be in jail.

So now, as well as my addiction, I was about to be in trouble with the parole board in New South Wales for breaching the ICO and I was homeless. I had nowhere to live. I couldn't go back to Brisbane because of the conditions of my ICO and I just gave up. I just surrendered and said, "Let's do it." I'd stopped using a week before I came here. I've been here about five and a half months. And it's been the best thing I've ever done.

We learn a lot about ourselves here. We realise that, you know, that ice isn't the problem, *we are*. We use drugs because we are unhappy with ourselves or we have trauma in the past. Like, I've said how I felt disconnected from my mother and didn't really feel loved. Although I knew she loved me, growing up, I never *heard*, "I love you." Still, to this day, it doesn't get said very much.

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Mum's probably a borderline alcoholic herself. She has her own problems. But, here, we learn about all those little things in your past, like your parents and grandparents – everything that makes you who you are. We learn why we use drugs to cope with life rather than do what normal people do (if there is a word 'normal people') in dealing with emotions and trauma and all different things.

I've learnt to deal with my emotions. Patience is a big thing. I've learnt to be able to sit in my own skin and be happy with who I am. A lot of addicts suffer from self-esteem issues – they don't like what they see in the mirror. But I kind of like what I see in the mirror these days. And I'm learning coping skills. I'm lucky that, in my life, I've had a sobriety time. I know how good life can be without drugs so I kind of keep reminding myself of that.

My sons are 21 and 19 now, and I have a seven-year-old girl. My boys are old enough to understand what I've done by using. It had a big effect on us. We have a close relationship now, but they really distanced themselves from me for a

long period of time. And my seven-year-old girl just doesn't understand what's going on really. She thinks I'm down here working, getting well. I think she does understand a bit, but it has had a massive impact on her – me being away from her. I was lucky enough to see her last week for a week and our relationship's better than ever again. We have a really close relationship, me and my daughter. And, you know, I feel it will only get stronger. I'm hopefully about to be approved for housing here in Canberra, so I'll have a place to bring her here and have her visit. It's not ideal, you know, but it's probably better than me living in my hometown.

And my girlfriend's here, too. I think our relationship's never been stronger. Conflict resolution is another thing we learn in here. How do I explain this? We learn to look at where the other person's coming from in life. You know, everyone's at different stages in their lives, whether they're addicts or not, and you learn to be assertive and your communication skills are built up. I have massive hope for us in the future. She's such a bright person as well. I think she's got probably a big future in support work with people addicted to drugs and alcohol. Although she doesn't have any kids herself, she's absolutely brilliant with children. So there's only good coming from it, really.

I think this program works on doing the right things, just little steps at a time, to start building your self-worth and self-esteem. It makes you feel good about

yourself again. And, you know, I do enjoy life. I think for a lot of years I looked at life like a curse. I can remember screaming at the sky, at God, saying, "Why didn't you *take* me, you piece of shit?" And I held a resentment against everyone in the world. Now I'm a lot more grateful about the little things in life. I've still got my kids and, you know, a great partner, parents and stuff like that.

I think life can throw all kinds of challenges at you, but drugs certainly aren't the answer. I've learnt, here, that people who have taken drugs may have a lot of problems in their life and it doesn't hurt just to stop and ask them what's going on in their life. A lot of the guys here have suffered child abuse and all kinds of stuff as kids. I'm lucky that hasn't happened to me, but I can only imagine. I'd want to use drugs too if I'd been molested as a kid. There's always a reason beyond why people do it, you know.

People don't just become drug addicts overnight because they use drugs. Drugs is their answer for dealing with the pain inside them that they can't deal with themselves.

Artists

GINGER GORMAN

Ginger Gorman is a fearless and multi award-winning social justice journalist. In the course of her 17-year media career she's interviewed everyone from eminent scientists and artists to hardened criminals and vicious Internet trolls.

During her media career Ginger has worked for ABC Local Radio, ABC Emergency, Triple J, Radio Netherlands Worldwide and Fairfax Community Newspapers.

These days she's a freelancer and regularly writes stories, makes radio and TV for major media outlets such as: news.com.au, Fairfax online, The Guardian, The Big Smoke, HerCanberra and the ABC.

She has an innate ability to connect and communicate with some of the most interesting and marginalised people in our community. Ginger works hard to translate those untold stories into powerful and insightful journalism.

HILARY WARDHAUGH

Hilary Wardhaugh is an award winning documentary and portrait photographer. She is an AIPP Master Photographer, Accredited Professional and a specialist in her field. She works closely with numerous charities and says community work has always been an important part of her life.

MARTIN OLLMAN

Martin Ollman is a freelance photographer based in Canberra, Australia. He began his career in Photojournalism in Canberra then in London, where he worked as a freelance photographer in the UK. He has had over 2000+ of his photographs published around the world, held several exhibitions of his work and has been awarded two national photographic awards.

JESS HIGGINS

Jess Higgins' practice primarily encompasses print media and drawing techniques. Her works investigate the on-going loss of human life at the hands of unethical practices of war. Her work uses the human body as a vehicle to explore physical and psychological states of trauma by depicting uncompromising and sometimes confronting imagery.

TOM BUCKLAND

Narrative and storytelling is a key component in Buckland's sculpture and performance works. He is a voracious bricolagist and collector of found objects which he uses to create process-orientated work that proudly displays a unique DIY spirit. Buckland also plays with audience interaction demolishing the invisible barrier between onlooker and artwork.

ON THIN ICE

