

FLIPSIDE

The Association of Participating Service Users



Experience & Identity

No. 53 Winter 2023

FLIPSIDE provides space for the voices of Victorians impacted by addiction. All contents featured here are produced by people who experience or have experienced addiction, either directly or through someone they care about.

FLIPSIDE is published by the Association of Participating Service Users - APSU, the Victorian consumer representative body for people who use alcohol and other drug treatment services.

This
publication is
produced on the land
of the Bunurong people
of the Kulin Nation.

APSU acknowledges the
Traditional Owners of country
throughout Australia and
recognises their continuing
connection to land, waters and
culture. We pay our respects
to their Elders past, present
and emerging.

Flipside No.53 Winter 2023

Front cover image 'Duck of Destiny' and

Rear cover image 'rirxeandfeltze' by Bill Backhouse

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Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed within FLIPSIDE do not necessarily represent the views and opinions of APSU.

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Just because I've done
something or experienced
something, it doesn't make me
that thing



image by
Megan B

Editorial

It is incredibly rewarding to get another edition of Flipside out to our readers.

Thank you to people who generously shared their experiences with identity, demonstrating again, that every journey is different.

Many of the contributors paid a high price for their lived experience, including their freedom, their homes, their relationships, their careers, their reputations. No wonder it is frustrating to hear it said, "Lock them up!" or to be told "Just get some counselling," or "Just tell him to stop." Family members like Marg Q are not outliers in the pages of Flipside, and readers with insight of the harms caused by alcohol and other drugs will relate to Carolyn C's spiral of addiction to pokies, and the renewed identity she got with the support of her lived experience community.

We also want to thank the APSU members who have been able to represent the experiences and interests of people with lived and living experience in their recent engagement with AOD services and government. Over the last few months, they have co-designed a new mental health and wellbeing website, helped develop policies to improve peoples' access to triage services, and had a say on the way that staff are prepared, trained and supported to work in alcohol and other drug services. Great outcomes.

A massive high-five to Cat Endersby, our Consumer Advocacy Officer and also, lucky for us, quite the talented Graphic Designer. Thanks Cat!

Enjoy!

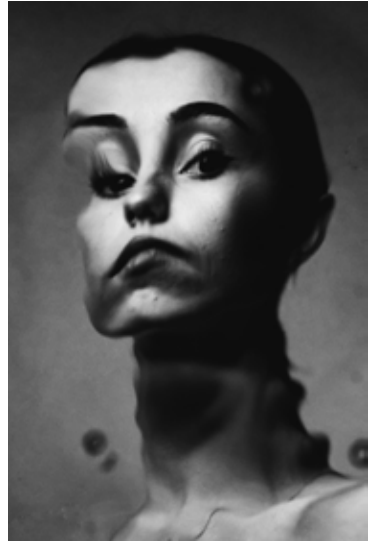


image by Teslariu Mihai

"Many contributors paid a high price for their lived experience, including their freedom, their homes, their relationships, their careers, their reputations."

My shifting identity

by **Daniel N**

Identity for me is how we identify our self in the community. It is not defined by our names. Identity is who we are and what we can contribute to our community.

For many years in active addiction my identity was addict and criminal and a body who some people feared.

When we shift our goals we can shift our identity. I am currently 70 days sober, and I have different goals and values than I had before. My identity is slowly shifting into a pro-social member of this community. I did this by taking the first step and realising that I had a problem.

As time goes by, we lose our self to a life that is the only one we have known, fearing the unknown of a life that we can picture but by ourselves couldn't reach.

I was a user for over 15 years. A life full of drugs and crime led me to spend about 10 of the last 14 years imprisoned. I am currently 32 years old and have had enough. While I'm not proud of my past, it is not something I can hide from. It has made me who I am, and every part of my past has got me to this point. And my past now becomes a powerful tool I can use to drive myself and help others.

At first I was bit sceptical about rehab, but so far in my experience it has been the definite game changer, having the support of people who I can relate to,

all sharing the one goal. That is what separates treatment in prison and treatment in the community.

In rehab you learn skills that you can actually apply in daily life with small exposure to the community. Many people do programs in prison but come their release date they have forgotten the tools they have learned and unfortunately fall into their old ways.

It is easy for some of the community to say, "Lock them up!" But the reality is that in prison people just expand their criminal networks, and everyone has a release date. From the first time I was imprisoned when I was 18, I met new people and connected with them outside and the chain continues over and over.

Rehab has been the best thing I have done. I have found friends, supports, and mostly the power to know I can do it in the community without substances. I can live a drug-free life outside those walls.

I urge anyone struggling with addiction to inquire into residential rehab. It took me 15 years to finally give it a shot, and it is really rewarding to wake up and get out of bed and not be dependent on drugs. It is a feeling of freedom on so many levels.

Many people do not understand addiction and they wonder "Why don't they just stop using?"



Well we would if it was that easy.

Asking someone like me to “just stop using,” is like asking someone who worked as a journalist all their life to build a house. Could the journalist just build a house? Wouldn't they need time and education?? People like me need time to learn and develop the skills to overcome a life of addiction.

I have found my using came from my emotions. After something would

happen, I would turn to drugs to self-soothe my pain. I would self-medicate to treat my mental illness and depression. There really is a difference between mental health and drug addiction, but in my eyes they fall hand in hand.

I really want to thank everyone that took the time to read this. I hope my words can help someone in any way or form.
Thank you!

I may have seen things differently

by YP

My identity when I was in active addiction was everything. My role models were the wrong sort of people, but their stigma rubbed off on me and I wanted to be like them.

My first run in with the law... well I guess they didn't know what to do with me. There was no help offered, like rehab, it was "just get some counselling."

I got counselling. And the guy I sat in front of had no clue. He was just ticking boxes so he could get paid. He didn't understand where I was coming from. Just because he studied and had a diploma and thought he knew best... definitely not.

Things did not get better for me, they got worse. More trouble, more drugs, worse crime and bigger pay.

Even times when I wasn't using, I was still chasing another addiction. I loved to run amuck and get into trouble. The jail sentences were getting longer. And who I once was, was no more.

My first time getting into trouble happened when I was 13 years old. There was no talk of rehab until I was 26, and still at that age I didn't want it.

My first shot at rehab went shit. I lasted two weeks and then I was out and running amuck again.





photo by
Freddy Do

Now I'm 28 and I've been in an integration program for the last 16 months. More options have opened up. And now my identity plays a huge part in my recovery. I've wanted to leave because my old identity was all I had and that's what worked. I've always gotten to a point in my life where I fuck up. But this is the longest time since I was 13 that I have stayed clean, out of jail, and not committing crime.

I do not know what has shifted. If you asked me what is different, I couldn't tell you exactly. I'm still trying to figure that out.

I do know what has helped.

What has really helped me is seeing other people with the same struggles as me, coming from the same life I've come from, and now they have a life, a home, a job, wife, and kids, and they are happy, and they are content.

In the past few years people have been getting better at understanding addiction and mental health, and how they can help.

When this all started for me, if I had some sort of mentor with lived experience trying to help me, who knows, I may have seen things differently



Marg Q

I arrived home exhausted one November evening in 2002. It had been a long working day. My children and I were expected at my sister's home to celebrate my father's birthday.

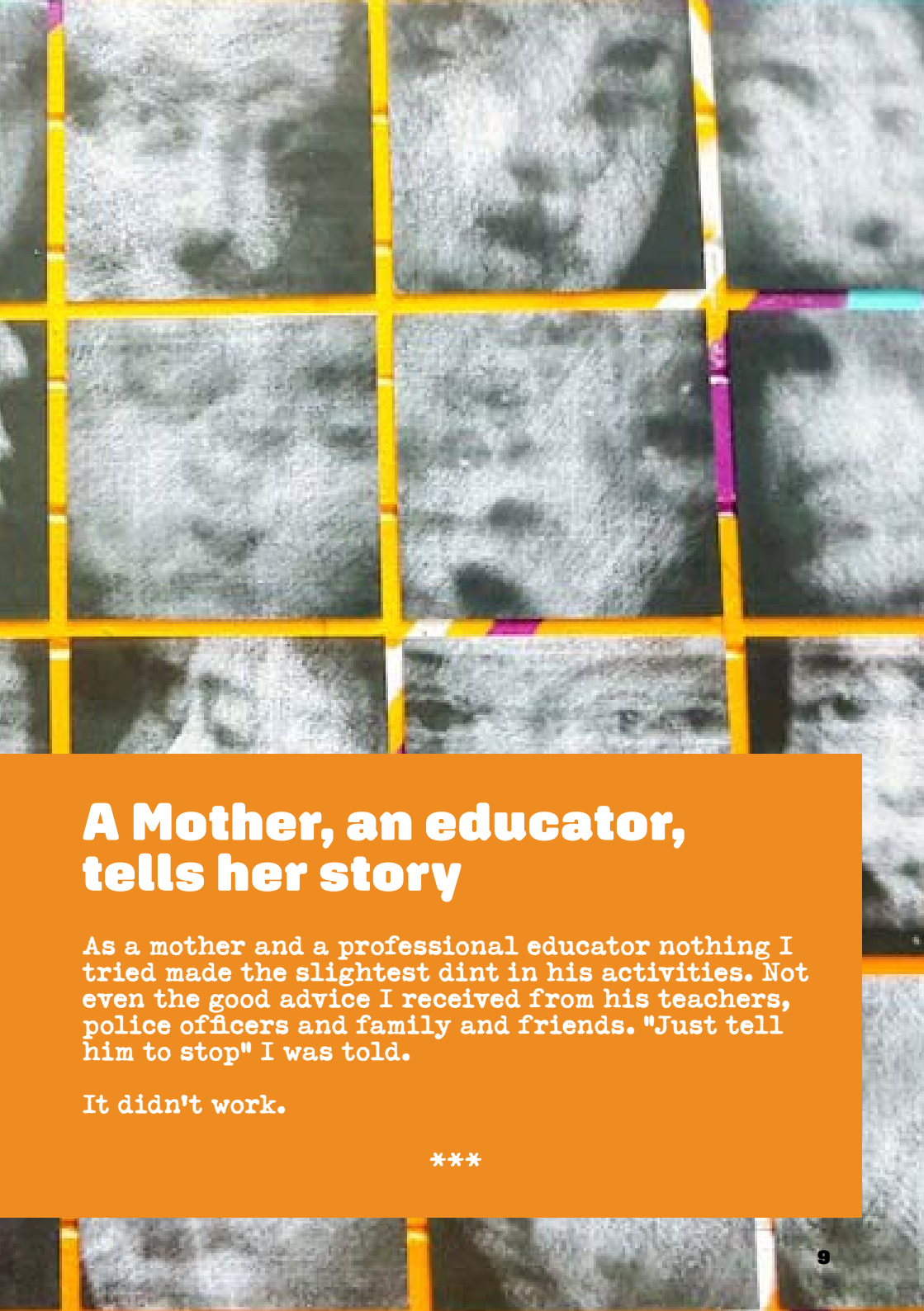
That morning I had presented at a conference in the Long Room at the MCG, about legal issues around drug use in schools. My focus that day was to encourage schools to adopt a harm reduction approach to drug use in schools rather than a punitive approach pursued through the police system.

In the afternoon I travelled from the MCG to Monash University in Clayton to provide training to secondary school physical

education teachers around the impact of cannabis on learning and safety. My presentation was well received and showed a demand, and need, for accurate information.

This same thirst for accurate information drove me to apply for the position I held. The role provided extensive training in drug education, pharmacology, policy development and resource development. Why? Because at home my oldest son along with his girlfriend was immersed in drug use, and I felt powerless to help him.

As he reached his late teens his drug use escalated.



A Mother, an educator, tells her story

As a mother and a professional educator nothing I tried made the slightest dint in his activities. Not even the good advice I received from his teachers, police officers and family and friends. "Just tell him to stop" I was told.

It didn't work.



The boot of my government work car was loaded with resources, including demonstration bongs. I was a senior project officer with the *Turning the Tide Project* created from the drug advisory research undertaken by Professor David Penington. One recommendation was that drug education be introduced into every school in the state of Victoria. I was employed to help schools develop a strategy and curriculum resources to do this.

When providing education sessions to school communities, that is parents, I owned up to having a child who no longer experimented in drug use but had moved along the drug use spectrum to dependent drug use of multiple substances.

I wanted to highlight that drug use did not discriminate.

I wanted parents to hear that young people experimented and sometimes never touched a drug again, while others like my son took risks, trying at times whatever was offered. I wanted parents to hear that the most loved and cherished children in the world may

experiment with drug use. My son was one of those children.

That night when I got home, I parked the government car near the side gate and walked inside. I could see my oldest son at the end of the house with friends, some I knew and several strangers. We nodded but did not speak. Over the weeks leading to this night our relationship was strained.

The mother in me began yelling at my youngest who was supposed to be ready to leave but had not had a shower. I rang my sister to say we would be a little late.

The front sliding door flew open, and shouting began, loud, violent shouting. Police with warrants, guns drawn and in flak jackets.

For five hours police pulled my home apart. They pulled out every item from the government car, scattering my education resources over the driveway, kicking them, stomping on them, and allowing the police dog to rip things up.

My son and his friends were arrested and taken away. My younger children and I were not allowed to move from the dining room table for those five hours. We were

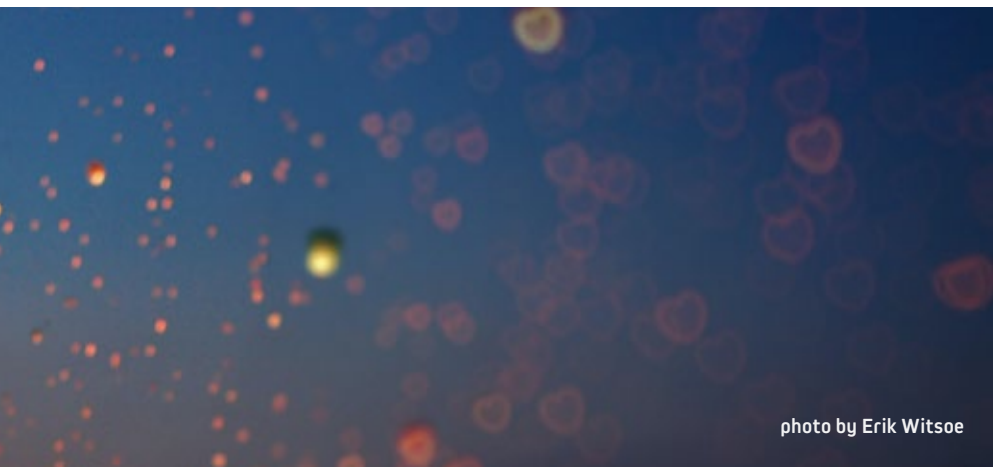


photo by Erik Witsoe

only allowed to use the toilet if we agreed to an internal examination from the female police officer. I refused the offer.

The Acting Sergeant from Ringwood spat in my face advising me that his mate “Bracksy would make sure I lost everything starting with my job.” True to his word the Acting Sergeant advised the Education Department that I was a drug dealer and that I was under investigation for drug-related activities. Evidence supporting this were the resources in the government car.

Despite my claims of innocence and demands for proof I was a drug dealer, the police wrote in a report that they were unable to provide the evidence of the MDMA tabs I had in the government car because the highly trained police dog ate them!!!

I began employment with the education department in January 1970 as a teacher. In February 2003 that offer of employment was rescinded as I was “politically embarrassing.”

Up until this moment my identity revolved around my abilities as an educator and as a mother.

I became unemployed...

Worse than being unemployed, my file states I was under investigation for drug-related activities. My son and his girlfriend spent time doing the then CREDIT program with bail conditions that set out that they were not to associate with each other whilst on bail. They then received suspended sentences.

My son's use of substances escalated. Heroin became his mistress, and I became his slave keeping him alive.

Our experience bonded us. No words removed the guilt riddling him. I struggled to hide my depression, my anger at police, and at my employer. I became unwell. I was fearful how as a parent I would support my family. Social invitations fell away.

I joined a support group that my son called my posse, holding hope that one day if I loved him long enough, he could be freed from the handcuffs of his addiction. He died from an overdose in 2008.

Our experience through this taught me compassion.

**I loved him at his absolute best,
and I loved him at his worst.**

BEACON

by Dixon B

The thing they often don't tell you about addiction is that it consumes... *everything*. Before you realize what's happening you've become less than you once were, you're diminished. If left unchecked it devours more than just your material possessions, it permeates your entire existence, destroying unbreakable bonds, digesting your memories, breaking down your very identity into unrecognizable fragments of who you once were leaving nothing but a scattered remnant.

I remember being that shell of a man. A thing, feral. Everything that once made me proud stripped away along with any hope that my life could ever be anything more than this pit. I felt the universe had turned its back on me. I figured I'd offended it somehow in a transgression long forgotten, perhaps in another life.

I'll never forget the conversation which changed everything. It was during lockdown; I'd been sleeping on a garbage mattress on the floor of some rooming house after the government mandated all us street folk were to be housed immediately. The isolation and boredom

drove me to open Facebook for the first time in years. At first seeing everyone I knew from back home in Canada living their adult lives with their kids and their joy just made me feel worse, but I came across the profile of one of my oldest and dearest friends, someone I hadn't thought of in nearly 15 years. I decided to reach out and make contact. That simple hello sparked a phone call, which ended up lasting 4 hours. That 4 hours was all it took to remind me who I once was, stories of adventures past triggered a cascade of memories and love, there were tears both of joy and of mourning because I knew the version of me in those stories was long gone.

Or was he?

I decided that night I didn't want to let that Dixon die. I started scouring my own Facebook looking for things that made me that joyful, quirky dude who drew people into his world. I found pictures of Halloween costumes I'd made for my ex-husband and I. I'd forgotten what a dork I was for couple's costumes based on old school video games. Older still, I found pics of art I'd crafted from polymer clay, clips from events I'd organized and smiles from all my friends at my wedding (to this day my most successful event, even though the marriage itself was a bit of a disappointment).

The gap between the person I was and the creature I had become seemed vaster than the distance I'd ended up from those people I once knew on the other side of the planet. How does one even start to build a bridge that long? But I remembered something a lost, dear friend had told me once: "You need to figure out what the first step is. Then the next and the next. It doesn't matter how many steps come afterwards you just need to figure out the first one, then the next."

And that's exactly what I did. I bought a push bike. From there I started the daily task of documenting my lockdown experience through photography. Quickly discovering a barrage of photo editing and digital art apps I started creating some stuff I was really proud of, still am. I remember rediscovering the confidence rush I get when creating something undeniably cool. That feeling, long forgotten, fully rivalled the rush I was getting from drugs ... but in a different way. Where addiction had consumed, this feeling replenished. I found myself believing I could actually become something wonderful again.

I knew I had to nurture this ember of new-found hope. I decided to order a small collection of polymer clay, in a rainbow of colours. I had gained a bit of a following decades past due to some of the interesting jewellery I'd made for the rainbow raver kids of the late 90s. I was excited about the potential for awesome and also made sure to give myself a well-deserved pat on the back for sacrificing some of my previously all-important methamphetamine budget to invest in feeling something better. *I was an artist again!*



photo by Shalaka Gamage

My Past & my
Experiences Don't
Define Me



image by Megan B

[continued]

But was that enough?

Time passed. Bit by bit I started regaining things I had once lost. I got a proper apartment, went through rehab, and started piecing together my broken identity into something new. I was still using fairly regularly, but with other things to care about my usage became less and less. I started working and developing social connections again, with proper well-adjusted humans. At first, I felt like an impostor. As if I was just pretending to be a part of their world. I still feel that way a lot of the time, but I also feel accepted which is a new feeling for me.

There was still something missing though, I found myself ruminating over stories past. My mind would drift to folks I encountered during my time untethered. The others who I'd left behind. My heart would sink as I remembered the feelings of hopelessness I felt and thoughts of the souls still trapped in that world who had no recollection of what self-worth actually feels like. Those who had given up on ever finding a way back. What about them? They were calling to me.

Calling... my calling? Eventually I realised my purpose. That missing piece of my identity I'd been struggling my whole life to figure out. The thing which made it all make sense for the first time. I was supposed to dip back into that world, not as what I was in addiction but as the proud survivor I became afterwards. I was meant to be an example of hope, the tangible embodiment of possibility, a light to bring anyone home who was willing to brave the journey.

I was meant to be a Beacon.

(Dixon is currently working towards this goal as a Peer Cadet with Alfred Mental & Addiction Health).

It's Not You, It's Me

by Brendan J

I have lived with mental health and addiction issues for most of my adult life ... well, for all of it really and before I was an adult. I'm forever qualifying things, how I remember shapes of how I see myself. If I have struggled for so long, then all change, even if it's small or takes a long time, is something to celebrate. I do not tend to celebrate though. ***As much as I feel an expectation to have recovered, rarely does anyone pat me on the back when I say, I have made a change, unless they have had their own experiences and understand how hard it can be.***

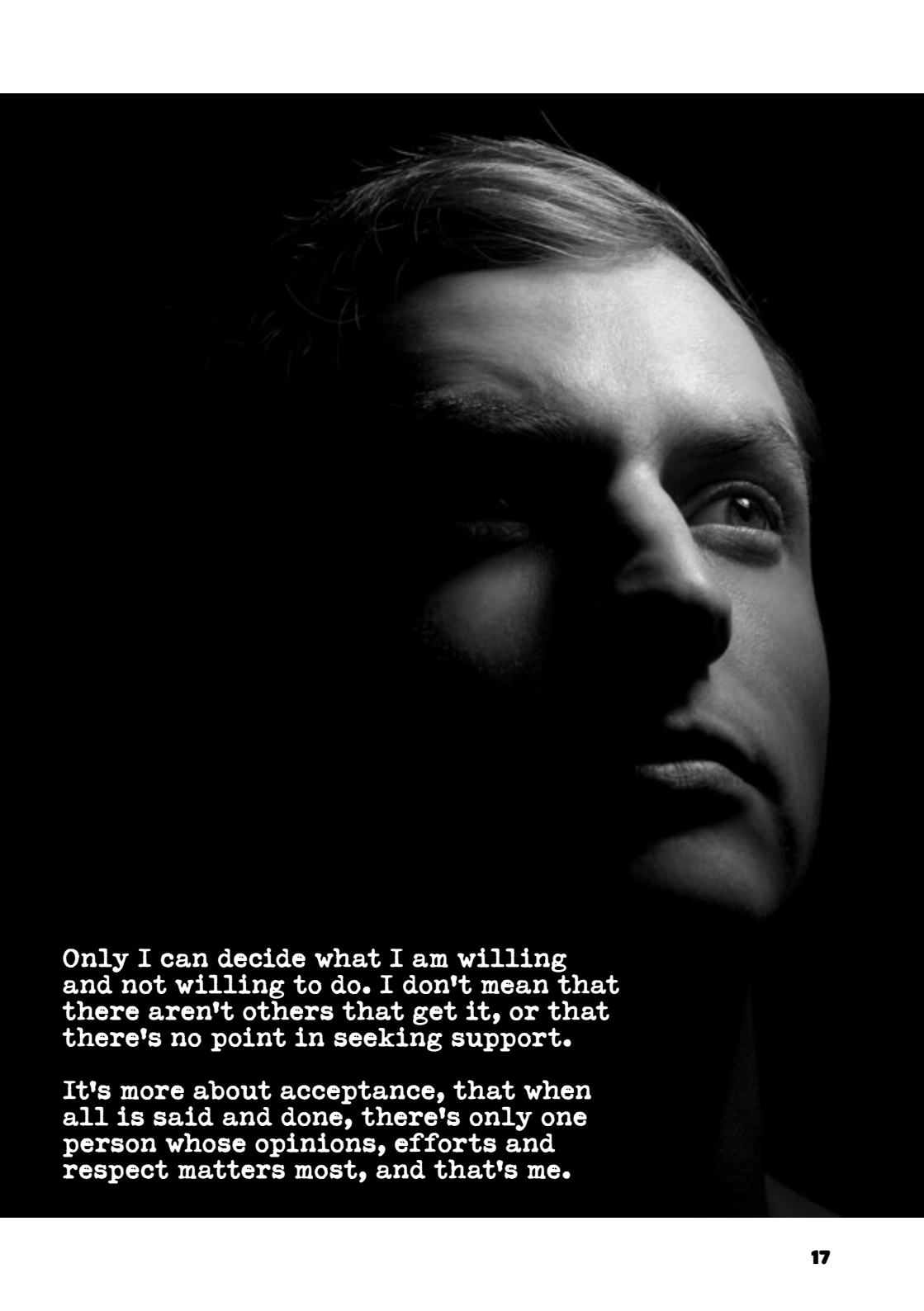
I get tired of myself, of my own failings, of the grind, and the sense that nothing has in fact changed. But it has. It's not that I look for validation from others or society at large. My opinion of myself matters most. I'm the only one who knows what has changed and what hasn't. That doesn't mean I'm not impacted by the views of others, of those closest to me and those that are meant to help. I have had mixed experiences with both. For me, knowing what you need to do does not make it easier to achieve.

I had support just recently wind up for this reason. Not for the first time in my recovery I was told that it is more about me doing than thinking. I get that it can be frustrating for others to hear the same story, and to try give hope to a person who has tried many things. I also get that being challenged can be useful and can get a positive response.

What I reflect on though is this: if you are frustrated, what do you think it's like for me? If you have nothing to help me other than saying "just do it," then what does that say about my years of struggle and the fact that I cannot?

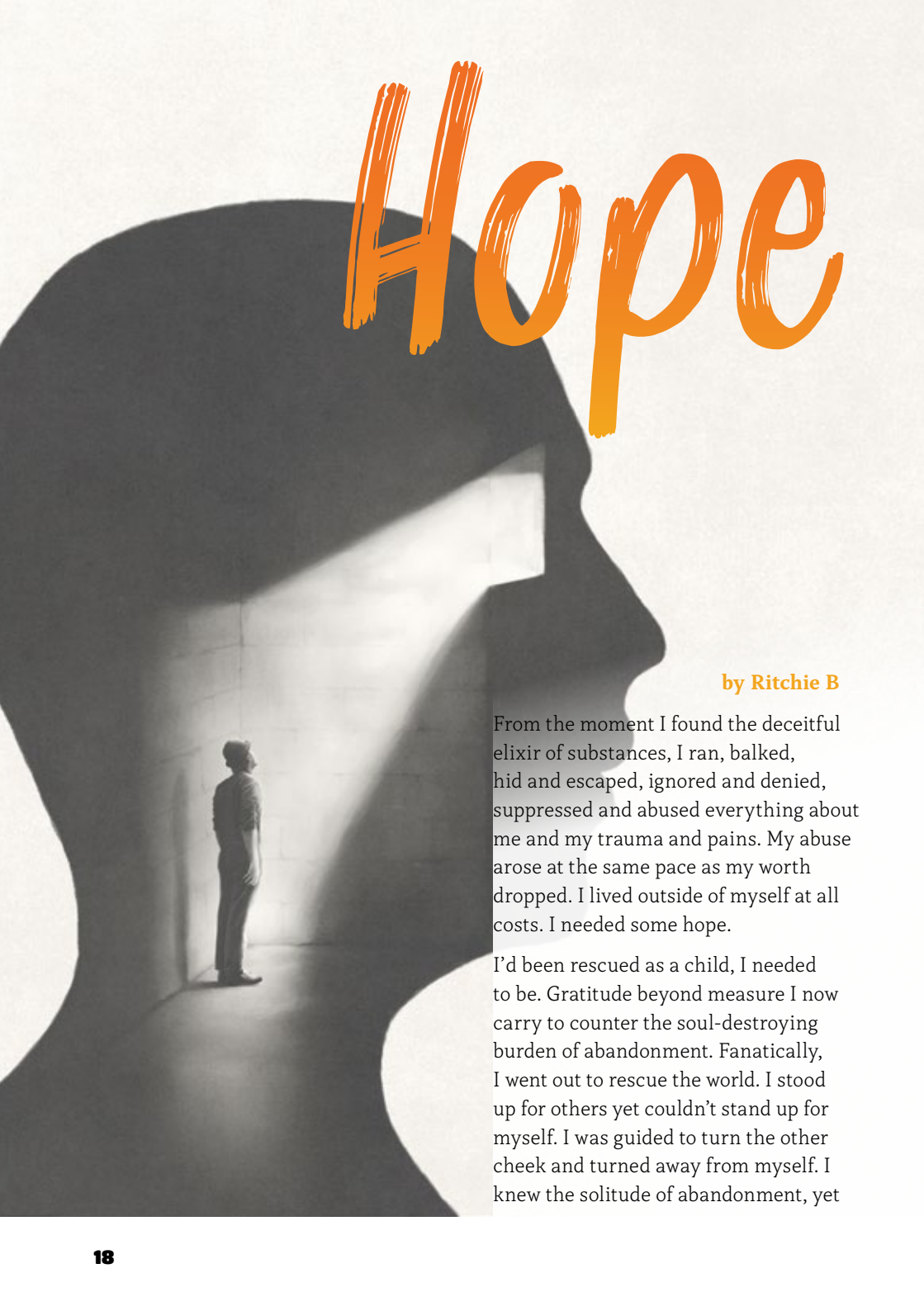
I am not asking for a miracle treatment, or to be told I have insight. Yes, I know what drives my using, and I know what helps, and what hinders, my mental health challenges. I control some of this, and some of it I can't. The support that would help me is not offered. It is me that has driven change as it is me that must live this life. I decide whether a change is worth making, whether I'm worth the effort, whether those in my life deserve better from me, and whether I want to be around to see better days.

Things can seem bleak at times, and at others it can seem so simple I wonder why I've struggled for so long. If things can vary so much and so often, rather than be surprised by the variation in support I get, perhaps I should expect it? I think things go wrong where I have expectations of myself and of others.



Only I can decide what I am willing and not willing to do. I don't mean that there aren't others that get it, or that there's no point in seeking support.

It's more about acceptance, that when all is said and done, there's only one person whose opinions, efforts and respect matters most, and that's me.



Hope

by Ritchie B

From the moment I found the deceitful elixir of substances, I ran, balked, hid and escaped, ignored and denied, suppressed and abused everything about me and my trauma and pains. My abuse arose at the same pace as my worth dropped. I lived outside of myself at all costs. I needed some hope.

I'd been rescued as a child, I needed to be. Gratitude beyond measure I now carry to counter the soul-destroying burden of abandonment. Fanatically, I went out to rescue the world. I stood up for others yet couldn't stand up for myself. I was guided to turn the other cheek and turned away from myself. I knew the solitude of abandonment, yet

abandoned myself, giving up on me again and again. I could hold nobody else as I couldn't hold me. Where was this thing called hope?

My journey to the beautiful world that is mine now took five attempts at Windana. Talk about faking it till I made it. It was here I was introduced to hope.

That original attempt was to try win my wife back. After 3 months, I'd learnt to self-explore and journal. I thought I had hope, and I found myself at Pakenham Station with \$20 in my pocket. Hope was gone.

I came again to get my children back, and another to avoid going back to jail. I began to see what was on offer, but I pushed against the need for time and practice, ignoring my trauma and the reasons I do the things I do to not feel. I left again. Like a distant relative, I only saw hope now and then.

My addiction refused to surrender and I lost the battle. I learnt a lot, but none of it could penetrate the walls, shield, armour, masks and weapons of self-destruction. My behaviours were too ingrained, sharp, and powerful. Without an army, I could not defeat them on my own. So I remained filthy on myself and the world around me. I hated hope.

Another child who I didn't know how to love, came into and went from my life. My other children were just hanging on to loving me, saw again my inability to save myself, love myself, let alone another. But this little girl turned me back towards love and hope became my friend.

This time I stayed for 6 months, relying on my kids for connection and placing the overbearing weight of my recovery on them. I refused to connect with others, I denied that I needed others to help me, I had done no searching for myself. I used to say I'd die for my kids, and many times I nearly did. I'd give anything to have someone special love me, but there was too much I wouldn't give up. I had to step out of my world of addiction. Only hope remained.

Finally I handed over control, trust, solitude, attitude, my ego, profile and every mask I've ever worn, everything - a whole new total surrender.

If I kept on doing what I had always done, I'd keep on getting what I always got. Hope is change.

I didn't put the pictures of my kids on my walls, it was me I needed to look at. I'm super grateful for my karma as Covid was another blessing. It gave me pause to learn poise, and gave me space to grow into. If it wasn't for the distance between you and I, where could I enjoy the love of meeting and connecting. It kept me safe and focussed, forcing me to connect with you, my beautiful peers. Now I know I need you in my life and I'm worthy to be in yours.

I've learnt love is in the time I give to myself, my peers, my kids, my community, my world and universe. There is always hope. And hope is everything.

Pokies Stole My Brain

by Carolyn C

At 64 I was sentenced to prison for 18 months. I've never had a speeding fine or parking ticket in my life.

To pay for my Pokies addiction I stole \$400,000 over 7 years from my employer, via EFT transfers. All the money went down the Pokies, no money went towards any luxuries or trips. I have no idea how much of my own money also went down the Pokies. I have paid back all the money, using my superannuation and inheritance. (Sadly, my father passed away not long after I was charged).

I am now 70, a grandmother of six. I am one of the lucky ones whose family stuck by me through all these difficult times. My sons, brother and best friend were all in court when I was sentenced. The best way to describe how we all felt was shock and disbelief. The judge and my barrister did not understand the harm that gambling can cause.

Gambling addiction can happen to anyone. Older people can be particularly vulnerable to getting hooked. My company boss is the one who taught me how to gamble on the Pokies. He would ask me out for dinner if he had nowhere else to go after work, and because I was so infatuated with him, and lonely, I would always say YES.

When he asked me to go away with some friends for a weekend, I knew we would be gambling, and I didn't have the money. So, I stole the money from the company account. It made me feel sick – every time I took money, I told myself I'd never do it again, but my gambling continued to spiral out of control.

In prison I learned from my Gamblers Help counsellor that these machines are programmed to addict, so you keep going back, not just to try to win back the money already lost, but to sit in front of a machine, win or lose.

After prison I found out about **Three Sides of The Coin** and joined this group of lived experience people in late 2019.

Even though performing my story causes me anxiety, I do this because if it stops one person ending up in prison or worse, it means something good has come out of something bad. I am proud of who I am now.

To learn more about our project, go to: threesidesofthecoin.org.au or email Judy at javisar@sharc.org.au

Why I joined Three Sides of the Coin (3SOC)

by Carolyn C

When I saw a 3SOC performance I was amazed at how this form of storytelling impacts people. I realised that telling my story could help others understand more about an addiction that led me to prison at the age of 64.

The 3SOC Artistic Director Catherine Simmonds spent a lot of time working closely with me to help me completely understand how I ended up being harmed by gambling. It's not easy to unpack your past, but can be helpful in recovery, knowing you survived a terrible time in your life and come out a healthy, happier, and stronger person. Audiences deeply connect to my story.

I would encourage anyone wanting to make a difference, to consider joining Three Sides of the Coin. We all support each other. We all have lived experience of being harmed by gambling. Most have gambled themselves, but we also have people in our group who

have been harmed by other's gambling. I realised I was not alone on this journey of recovery. Regardless of whether you were the gambler or the affected other, we are all the same. We all do this work for the purpose of helping others.

After every performance we sit as a group and debrief. We discuss how we think it went, check that everyone is feeling OK and discuss any of the questions that were asked.

My feeling is that something good must come from something bad. As someone once said after a performance: ***"You turn dog shit to GOLD"***. This is exactly how I feel about performing my recovery from gambling harm story.

3SOC has also created short ***Recovery Gamble*** video stories with people with lived experience. Contact us to find out more: threesidesofthecoin.org.au or email Judy at javisar@sharc.org.au

Additional note

Three Sides of the Coin is made up of people who have been harmed by gambling, and their stories remind us that gambling is a public health concern that affects us all.

Through creative workshops and peer support, people explore their stories, and performances are based on peoples' lived experiences. 3SOC share these stories live, and in video works - to challenge stigma and highlight the links between gambling, alcohol and drugs, mental health and family violence.

3SOC has an office at SHARC where the Project Coordinator, Judy Avisar is based.

Find out more about the people who share their stories, and the creative team behind 3SOC, at the 3SOC website at <https://threesidesofthecoin.org.au/>. The 3SOC website also contains clips from 3SOC video stories, documentaries, and interviews with 3SOC performers. Check out their newsletter too.



APSU – The Association of Participating Service Users is the peak Victorian consumer body for people who use, have used, or are eligible to use mental health and alcohol and other drug (AOD) services, including family members and significant others impacted by these issues.

We believe that people who use AOD services have a wealth of knowledge and experience – their needs, strengths and expertise should drive the system.

Become an APSU member for free and receive:

- Invitations for paid participation in research, policy-making and service design
- Notices to forums and events
- Training to utilise your lived experience
- Regular changes to contribute your voice to the debate as a paid podcast guest, magazine contributor and event speaker
- Notice of relevant employment vacancies and policy developments
- ... and this, FLIPSIDE, our twice-yearly magazine by and for consumers

Join our community by scanning the QR code or visit: sharc.org.au/join-apsu

