

GIVING BACK FOR A NEW LIFE

John Mackie was so grateful for the new life that recovery had given him he wanted to give someone else that chance too. He decided to become a kidney donor. "It was one little tiny bit I could give back to humanity I guess, a little offering, and I'm so glad I did it."

John is Residential Support Worker in the front office at Higher Ground.

"I had an immense feeling of gratitude through my recovery from drinking and gambling which was putting my life on a downward spiral. I really didn't have a clear future. Or I knew the future and it wasn't at all good. Getting into recovery transformed my life and I was so grateful.

"I got a second chance and I wanted to offer a kidney to someone else to have a second chance – without knowing who got it, that was not my concern. It was a donation that I could make."

When the surgeon gave John a pen to mark the site of the operation, in case the surgeon's arrow came off in the shower, John couldn't resist drawing a kidney on the site and writing, 'Free to a good home'.

Under the donor scheme recipients and donors don't know each other. But John did receive a thank you forwarded from the recipient's hospital after the successful surgery. "It was a big buzz to get that card saying 'hey thanks for the donation, it's going to change my life'." The recipient told him of an ambitious fitness goal for the coming year. "It was very nice to know it went somewhere and that she's a wife and mother. But that's all I know."

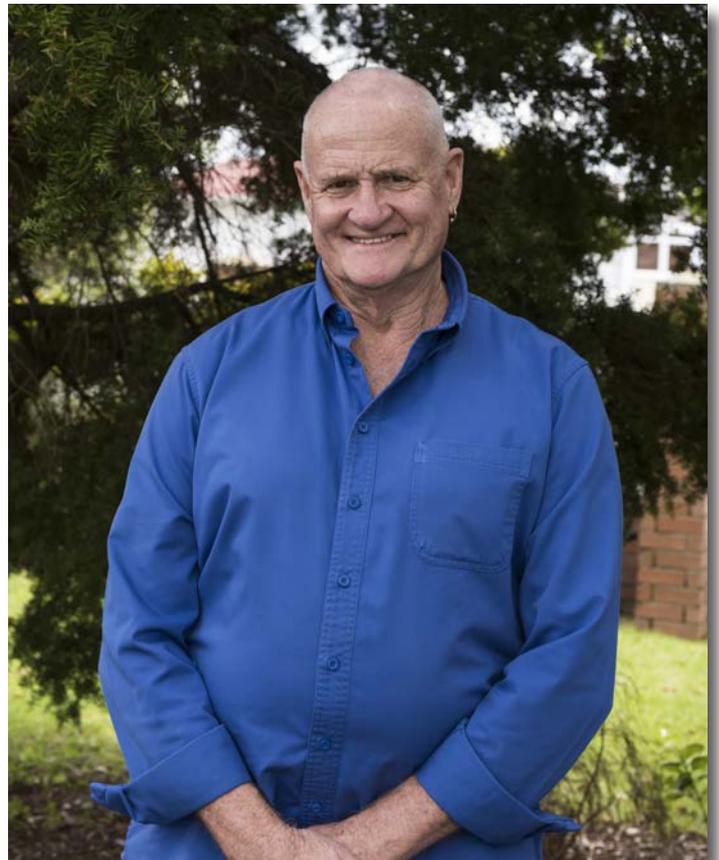
John had the operation in February and seven weeks off work. He'd lost some weight and was reasonably fit before surgery. "I got as best prepared for it as I could. And just got on with it."

Recovery was mostly walking and not doing anything particularly strenuous. "I was never aware of my kidneys when I had two of them and I certainly haven't noticed that I've now only got one. I've had more trauma from a pedicure," he laughs.

John's life became unmanageable through alcoholism and once he stopped drinking, even with the support of a 12-Step programme, he became a compulsive gambler. "I went straight from one addiction to the other, hiding in front of a machine like I used to hide in the bottle."

John has been sober for nearly 15 years, six years of which his gambling was getting worse and then out of control. He has been gambling-free in a 12-Step fellowship for eight years ten months. That's from the date of his last bet tattooed on his ankle, "It never lets me forget."

He started with Higher Ground as a volunteer driver, and still comes back one night a week to take residents to evening 12-Step meetings. "I used to see people in my rear vision mirror and think, 'gosh these people look good, these people are improving' and I want to be part of that."



It took a year to get regular shifts as Residential Support Worker but it was worth waiting for. "I could see that there was something magical going on at Higher Ground and I really wanted to be part of it. Everyone here does the very best to make sure people get the best chance at recovery."

He and his wife Wendy started on the kidney donor track together together but as testing progressed only John advanced as a donor. "She became 100% support for me, so between us we produced a kidney. It would have been the same if I'd been rejected, she would have gone ahead."

The process took over a year of extensive testing and finding out about compatibility. "Their concern is not to do any harm to the donor so they certainly don't want to take a kidney if the other one's not in good shape. And they also don't to pass any problems on to the recipient."

Continued on back page

DISCOVERY – I WAS AN ADDICT

Drugs and partying took over his life but he didn't know what was wrong. Now more than two years drug-free, this is his story.

“I had no idea I was a drug addict, or a drug dealer for that matter - after all, I'm a white boy who grew up on the North Shore of Auckland, went to a private school, had a great corporate job, nice house, nice car, friends.

There is no addiction in my immediate family. I realised after treatment that an uncle was an alcoholic, but he is the only person in my wider family that I know of.

I didn't do okay at school. There was no substance abuse and I didn't drink, but I was bullied mercilessly because I was gay. My teen years I felt trapped, that I had no one in my corner, unsupported, victimised. Horrific things happened to me at school in the early 1990s. Maybe that's changed at schools now, but it's probably still hard because otherwise why would we have such a high suicide rate among young men like me?

There had always been something, something wrong. I took a bagfull of pills every day (prescribed) for depression, anxiety, to sleep, a pill for every occasion. I also always liked to party, but I didn't drink every night and certainly not during the day, unless it was a weekend, oh and I longed for the weekend. I basically spent all week working so I could get as out-of-control as I wanted on the weekend.

I had always liked to take things up a notch, so was no stranger to drugs and neither were my friends; the acceptable kind, alcohol, a couple of lines of this or that at a house party or a gig. Of course I would always have extra, because I wasn't like my friends, I just needed more than them.

I had dabbled with methamphetamine in my twenties but had always been take it or leave it. Somewhere along the line things changed to needing it. This was coupled with another drug, GHB which I also started to need to make my world seem okay. Increasingly I only felt okay or normal if I had it, all the while my good buddy alcohol was sitting there in the background but it hardly counted as harmful: after all lots of people drank far more than I did.

I was in my late thirties when work just started to get too much and far too in the way of my drinking and drug use. I never went to work on Mondays, that was a given. Getting out of bed and going to work had become the hardest and most fear-inducing thing I could think of. It was obvious to my workplace that I was not performing, but not to me - I could only look at how it was other people's fault. Finally after months of them asking me what was wrong and me explaining I had depression etc I was approached by my boss and told due to me being so 'unwell' they would help me out by giving me a sizeable amount of money to leave, take a break and you know, get my health in check.

My plan was to congratulate myself and take a few weeks out and then get some contracting work. Four months later I had utterly lost control, I had turned into what I call a 'full-timer'. I had gone from a responsible corporate office worker to someone who had started dealing with gangs where guns and money and drugs were casually left round and part of reality.

And sometimes not so casually. I had pissed off one gang and someone had to pay them money to leave me alone, and then I had to pay them. I had been chased, robbed, beaten, and then the cash ran out. I couldn't get my drugs of choice, and the reality began to hit me, to crush me, to twist my mind inside out. I liken the comedown to my soul being hollow, and weeping.

I did not care about my life, let alone anyone else's life. I ignored calls from family and friends, surrounding myself with people who were doing the same as I was. I missed birthday lunches and family events and did not participate in my life. I basically kept to my room, an unclean, tortured, shallow being. Yet, still at this point I was under the illusion that drugs weren't the problem. I just thought I wasn't good at life like other people were.

During this time of angst, a friend came over to my house. He had had trouble with drugs and I had helped him out. He was doing this thing called recovery, all I knew was that he wasn't allowed to take drugs anymore and I thought, that poor

guy.

He explained the dark places that his using took him to, and some of the flawed thinking he displayed, his experience of addiction, his strength and how he came through to the other side, his hopes for a future that was now his for the taking.

It struck me like a punch in the face. I was a drug addict! The thing that had always circled the periphery of my mind (the thing that was always wrong with me) and filled me with absolute terror was true. But my friend was proof that I could live, and be happy without drugs or alcohol.

It was time to get help. Some public services were mentioned but I felt like I was too good for that (self-centred, stuck up, and demanding) And I also had to wait and there was no way I wanted to wait. Fortunately there was a private medical detox and rehab that could take me immediately, and that was far more my style.

So I started my journey and was introduced to the 12-Step fellowships (again, I was far too good to be with 'those people' in a meeting in some kind of church hall somewhere). But slowly I was taught about this illness that I have, and Higher Ground was suggested. I had visited my best friend when he was in there about 14 years earlier.

I told them what they could do with their suggestion about going to Higher Ground, and that I most certainly wasn't bad enough to go there, the place seemed like a cross between a hospital and a WINZ office overseen by some sort of military presence. My ego was far too big to consider it as a possibility.

I don't know what happened, but somewhere along my stay at the private rehab my thinking changed. I had already made such a mess of things in my life, and I really wanted this new life that I'd had a glimpse of to work so I started to listen to the staff there who were suggesting I go to Higher Ground.

I was terrified by the legends I had heard and of the people that in my mind I was not as bad as. And of the counsellors: and yet I thought I knew it all and there would be nothing they could teach me.

I was also terrified of sharing a room with someone (especially a straight guy). I hadn't done that since school camp which for me was a place of ridicule and never knowing what humiliating and shocking thing would happen next - tricks being played on me, my things messed with, being isolated, I was an outsider who didn't belong.

As a guy who likes guys, I found it extremely confronting being in a house full of them. I feared big, intimidating guys with all their testosterone all living together in one dorm. I'm not overtly gay, but was terrified that some of the guys would find out. I readied myself for the guys in the house to start mocking me, or worse the guys who I had started to form bonds with to exclude me. But it never happened.

It didn't happen because Higher Ground makes sure that no one is to be ridiculed. It was clear to me that the behaviour I had experienced toward me earlier in my life would not be tolerated in this house. The framework that is set up may be rigid and strict and behaviour monitored, but all of these things together with a team of people who really care about making a difference in peoples lives and upholding these standards made me feel safe. I have never felt so safe in my entire life.

This feeling of safety was something that kept me there at the beginning. In the obnoxious, privileged, indignant mind that I entered with, I was not going to learn anything in this place where I felt like I was better than everyone, even the counsellors who I thought had nothing to teach me, and at first I didn't. I spent my time being angry that I was there and I felt almost as down as I had before I detoxed.

So I started to do something that I never thought I'd do: I started to pray, as had been suggested. I can't explain it, but soon after, I woke up one day and felt the world was a bit brighter. I made a conscious choice to change my attitude, and funny

Quality care at Higher Ground

Access to treatment is part of an international accord



From left, Higher Ground kaumatua Rawiri Pene, Neal Bedford from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Emily Kay from the Ministry of Health, Higher Ground Director Johnny Dow, Professor Richard Mattick and Martin Dessart from the UN International Narcotics Control Board.

Higher Ground recently welcomed two international visitors from the United Nations International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) on a visit to New Zealand.

“We were impressed by the government and non-government coordinated response to the New Zealand drug problems,” says one of the visitors, Professor Richard Mattick. “We recognised the growing need for quality care, as drug use patterns change in New Zealand. The Higher Ground staff, programme and premises were an example of that quality care.”

The visitors were Professor Mattick - a board member of INCB and Martin Dessart, Drug Control Officer for INCB. Professor Mattick says the INCB works in agreement with countries globally to address licit use of drugs, and understand illicit use. Part of the work of the INCB is to understand treatment responses, including government and NGO services, such as the excellent services in New Zealand, he says.

The visitors were accompanied by Emily Kay, senior policy analyst from the Ministry of Health and Neal Bedford, senior policy adviser at the New Zealand Embassy in Vienna and Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade who were guiding them through their visit to various government agencies and several addiction treatment providers.

The visit opened with a powhiri by Higher Ground residents and part of a presentation first given at the Cutting Edge addictions conference.

This was a first for both Richard and Martin and they enjoyed the cultural experience and acknowledged the importance of haka and powhiri.

The INCB was also impressed with the Higher Ground facilities and programme, according to Emily Kay and Neal Bedford. The visitors engaged in a lively discussion about the therapeutic community and addiction treatment in New Zealand with Higher Ground director Johnny Dow. “Higher Ground is a very beneficial service and the group was pleased to have had an opportunity to learn more about the work the programme does,” says Emily Kay.

The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) visit to New Zealand was part of the Board’s regular work to oversee the implementation of international drug control conventions which New Zealand is party to.

Martin Dessart says the purpose of the visit was to give the Board an understanding of the approach New Zealand takes to control drugs, to ensure that patients get medicines and that those affected by drug dependency have access to treatment services. He is based in Vienna, Austria at the secretariat of the INCB and the United National Office On Drugs and Crime.

Richard Mattick is the Professor of Drug and Alcohol Studies in the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre at the University of New South Wales, Sydney within the Faculty of Medicine.

that - it actually worked.

I started to form bonds with people around me, after all we were all in this together. Safety around gender and sexuality was really important to me and really did help me, it chipped the top off the iceberg. I saw the biggest, most macho guys in there cry because someone had called me and some others a really nasty term for gay.

Being in there with people from all walks of life quickly made me realise and be grateful for the life that I had had.

Family support was pivotal, my family came to multiple family groups and one-on-one counselling. I had presence from my parents at every opportunity they had to visit and take part. They wanted the best for me and were open to the process and Higher Ground really helped them with that. They got to learn so much from hearing other people’s struggles.

The first time I really felt gratitude was close to the end of my treatment when my counsellor took me out for a coffee. Realising what these people had done for me was overwhelming, all of the people that bared their souls and made a choice to evolve as people, the counsellors, the people that make up the living, breathing thing that is Higher Ground. I cried in a way I had never felt before, this was pure gratitude.

I am grateful every day for the experience that I had at Higher Ground, the bonds

I have there with staff and my peers is something that helps keep the recovery I have today.

The life I lead now is a very different. On the surface it might look the same, but to me I’m an utterly different person and I experience life in a whole different way. I feel safe in my own mind. I feel a freedom that I have never had before, a freedom mostly from not being judgmental of myself and then consequently how I feel towards and treat others; having no fear of nor paranoia about what people think of me.

I never wanted to go to 12-Step meetings, I was someone that didn’t think they had a lot to learn from others. But since graduating from Higher Ground, I stay within the 12-Step programmes of Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous where I attend the Rainbow meeting.

I have a sponsor, I work the Steps. Every meeting I go to I learn something new. I have friends, I say ‘yes’ to things and have never been so successful at just living life and dealing with what life gives me, the good along with the bad.

I would not have this amazing life if I hadn’t listened to the skilled and caring staff of the private rehab where I started my journey, who told me to give Higher Ground a chance and made me look at it as an option; and that once there I gave Higher Ground a chance to work its magic on me. Because it really did once I let it. ”

How to Make a Referral to Higher Ground

Higher Ground welcomes self-referrals.

Health, social and legal professionals wishing to make a referral to Higher Ground should note that our admission criteria require residents to be over 18 years and over, have a primary diagnosis of alcohol or other drug dependence, an interest in 12 Step recovery and a drug-free status on admission.

Referrals or self referrals can be made by telephoning 09-834 0042 for a pre-admission assessment appointment on weekdays between 8.30am and 4.00pm.

Assessments in detox facilities or hospital can be arranged. Applicants who have outstanding legal charges are considered on a case by case basis. If required, Higher Ground can organise a medical detox through referral to the Auckland Regional Alcohol and Drug Services.

Making a Donation

Higher Ground is a registered Charitable Trust. Donations over \$5.00 are tax deductible and may be sent direct to Higher Ground. Higher Ground is dependent on charitable donations for the continuation of its programme.

Higher Ground Trustees

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| Janet Colby | • Counsellor & Chairperson of the Trust |
| Antonia Fisher QC | • Barrister |
| Fiona Howard | • Psychologist |
| Janine Parsons | • Public Sector Area Manager |
| Karl Robinson | • Consultant & Hon. Trustee |
| Marino Te Moana | • Minister |
| Paula Parsonage | • Consultant |
| Paul O'Sullivan | • Company Director |
| Shane Hussey | • Chartered Accountant |
| William Rainger | • Public Health Physician |

Contact Details

- | | |
|------------|---|
| Address | • 118 Beach Road,
Te Atatu Peninsula
Waitakere
Auckland 0610 |
| Mail to | • PO Box 45 192
Te Atatu Peninsula
Waitakere
Auckland 0651 |
| Telephone | • office 09-834 0017
• after care 09-834 0076
• admissions 09-834 0042
• residents 09-834 3700 |
| Office fax | • 09-834 0018 |

Continued from page 1

The recipient comes with their own donor and if they are not compatible there is often a zigzag between two or three donor-recipient couples, which is what happened in John's case.

John knows that the person who received his kidney will have noticed a huge improvement in her life. Having previously worked as a medical technologist and as a delivery driver around hospitals he had seen people waiting and hoping for the possibility of a donated kidney.

Dialysis patients were usually in great discomfort for a long time and there were always more people wanting a kidney than donors. "I'd seen people sitting in chairs on dialysis, and thought it was a pretty miserable life. I certainly had sympathy for them and knew how much better they were with a donated kidney."

John was not particularly worried about the surgery. He had worked in operating theatres running heart/lung bypass machines during cardiac surgery in New Zealand and the United Kingdom and been a medic in the New Zealand Army Reserves for over 30 years. "I have a lot of faith in surgical procedures and great confidence in our medical personnel.

"There are always risks with any surgery but it was explained very carefully the risks that are there and the potential for something untoward happening in theatre or post-operatively.

"It's a risk but not a huge one and there is a chance of your sole kidney failing even after you've been very well checked over. However if the kidney was in good condition prior to the operation then there's no more chance it's going to fail afterwards."

Donating a kidney was a way of doing something practical and positive for someone else anonymously. "It was something I could do for someone else because I have been given an extra chance at life.

"That's why I love working at Higher Ground, being part of other people's recovery. Not a day goes by without being aware of my own recovery and how grateful I am for that so I can give something back."

John acknowledges Higher Ground for making the donation possible. The government paid a contribution towards salary while he was not working, and Higher Ground offered to make up the difference. "They were very generous about paying and there was no hesitation in Higher Ground granting me leave."

John has not looked back. "I love my family, I love my job, every thing is going well for me and looks good for the future. I just wouldn't have had any of it if I'd carried on along the road I was on. I'm so immensely grateful for that."

John is someone who keeps on giving. He's a collector for the Heart Foundation and Blind Week and contributes to other charities. He and Wendy support the New Zealand Down Syndrome Association, where he stands in as Santa at the annual Christmas get together and joins the buddy walk once a year around Mt Eden. "It's such fun doing that and I've met a couple of people who have been through the Higher Ground programme who have a Down Syndrome family member. There is always a big hug."



Seasons greetings and happy New Year

The year is drawing to a close and Higher Ground would like to say thank you and pause to acknowledge the wider relationships that support us to continue this valuable work.

It's has been another busy year, with visits from the Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, the Minister of Health the Hon Dr David Clark, Minister of Transport and Housing and Te Atatu MP and neighbour Phil Twyford and a number of other politicians. As part of our on-going relationship with the Alcohol and Other Drugs Treatment Court we hosted another moving graduation ceremony. We also hosted training days for the wider therapeutic community.

We wish to thank friends, supporters and colleagues for your help and collaboration, so we can continue giving hope and saving lives. We look forward to more good work together in 2020.



We hope you have enjoyed this issue of the Higher Ground News. If you do not wish to remain on our mailing list, or are incorrectly listed, please write to HGDRT, PO Box 45 192, Te Atatu Peninsula, Waitakere, 0610.

For further information about the Higher Ground rehabilitation programme phone Programme Director, Johnny Dow 09-834 0017 or fax 09-834 0018 email admin@higherground.org.nz www.higherground.org.nz