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## Stories of recovery at Mount Carmel

*These are three of hundreds of stories that could be written about men and women who found recovery from alcoholism at Mount Carmel.*

*The stories are:*

***Rachel's story***  
***I suffered a stroke at 34***  
***I stood for Parliament but ...***



### Rachel's story

Some argue that alcoholism stems from a genetic pre-disposition, and others cite life's events as the cause. But whether it begins with nature or nurture, the odds were stacked against Rachel from the start.

She was just one month old when her mother left her father - both were alcoholics - to move in with a new partner. But her stepfather was an abusive man, towards her and her mother, and the new relationship was very troubled. When Rachel was 12, her mother took her and two younger siblings to Australia to escape the partnership.

In Australia Rachel went off the rails. She started drinking, smoking marijuana, and running away from home. Unable to cope, her mother sent 14-year-old Rachel, now pregnant, home to England to her father and his new partner, who was also an alcoholic.

Rachel lost the baby, and her new home was "total madness". But at 15 she was taken into the care of a foster family. "For the very first time in my life", said Rachel, "I had stability. I passed all my GCSEs, and then studied hard for A levels". But she didn't sit them, instead getting a job and moving back with her step-mother. Her father had left, and she and her step-mother became drinking partners.

Her twenties were a progressive decline. At 20 Rachel had her own flat and a job, but she met a man who was to introduce her to hard drugs, and marry her. They had a profoundly disabled child, and after a few years Rachel fled to a Refuge to escape her husband's violence. Leaving behind her son was and is a profound source of regret.

She soon met another man, became pregnant, and took alcohol and cocaine throughout the pregnancy. After the baby was born she made her first attempt at giving up drink and drugs by attending a day centre. But relapse soon followed.

The next few years saw another baby, progression to crack cocaine, and a further attempt to give up drink and drugs. But after that failed, her partner left and had a breakdown, and her two girls were taken away from her. The downward spiral continued into heroin addiction, her £80 a day habit financed by shoplifting, and sometimes by sleeping with dealers. During this time she experienced overdoses, being Sectioned, and more failed detoxes.

Finally, in her early thirties, Rachel's luck changed. In 2011 two social workers took a close interest in her, and against the odds obtained funding for her to go to Mount Carmel, a residential rehab in South London specialising in alcoholism. It was not a promising start at Mount Carmel, because Rachel could hardly bring herself to speak in the therapy groups for three months. But the staff were sympathetic and persisted with her, and the next four months saw rapid progress.

“When I’d gone through detoxes before, I’d just stopped drinking, without addressing the causes.” Rachel explained. “Here, for the first time, thanks to the staff, I was facing up to the patterns of my life. At last I was persuaded to accept help, to listen to another point of view, and to work hard on myself, because I felt the staff believed in me. And as a result, I changed.”

Leaving Mount Carmel after seven months of daily therapy, Rachel keeps very busy building her recovery. Living in a Mount Carmel “follow-on house”, she keeps close to her rehab environment and its free aftercare, and to AA. In addition, she is volunteering with a homeless charity, studying Health and Social Care, and planning to work as a peer mentor for others going through rehab. She sums up how she feels about her life. “I have friends and self-respect now. I’m back in contact with my daughters, and slowly building my relationships with them, and their father. I’m contributing to society through my volunteering, and I’ll be doing more as my studies progress. Before I came to Mount Carmel, I really was going to die. But now, I’ve got a life.”

(Rachel is not the client’s real name).

## **I suffered a stroke at 34**

My life just over 2 years ago existed of breathing; I was technically alive. At that time I was totally empty, alone and petrified of everything – caged. I was a nothing. I had lost myself in the world, and I had no place in it anymore. I was totally numb to everything and everyone.

At age 16 I drank alcohol excessively, and this continued with periods of drug use until the age of 39. In 1999, aged 29, I felt I’d hit a ‘rock bottom’ and after a visit to the doctor I completed my first home detox, then weekly counseling. For 6 months, except for one ‘blip’, I remained sober. I had stuck to the plan and deserved a drink after that! I began drinking what I thought was moderately, but was soon back to drinking excessively.

In the following years, in a nutshell:

2005 – I had a stroke, and lost the use of left my hand. I was then detoxed.

2006 – I had a brain operation, with a pre-op detox and artery bypass.

2007 – After a 10 day hospital detox, I lasted 3 hours before drinking.

2008 – I was admitted to hospital weighing 6 stone, with malnutrition and depression. Another hospital detox was followed by 5 weeks of sobriety before relapsing.

2009 – I relapsed a month after a 28 day hospital detox and a 12 week day programme of alcohol treatment.

2010 – After a 28 day hospital detox (my seventh) I entered Mount Carmel.

I’m now a graduate of Mount Carmel’s 6 month residential programme – and I have not had a drink today

I finally admitted to myself that to remain abstinent I needed intensive treatment. I could not do this on my own – I needed residential re-hab. At last I accepted support and took guidance from my Care Manager to come to Mount Carmel.

It worked out well for me but it was hard. No words can explain, nor perhaps would you understand, what it means to me to be where I am in my life today. I have a life today. Through Mount Carmel I have come alive, into the person I’m meant to be, maintaining my mental, emotional, spiritual and physical health. Mount Carmel is committed to every client’s well-being (although this is not always understood by the client at the time!), which has allowed me to develop and forever grow in recovery. I have no desire to take a drink or drug today. There is no magic trick. What Mount Carmel has or does I could not name. I could not tell you exactly what happened. But I can tell you something happened, and I accept it.

Since leaving Mount Carmel I have completed a number of short courses: Introduction to Counselling Skills, Journalism, and Assertiveness and Self-esteem. I'm currently studying 'Preparing to teach adult literacy' at City Lit. Through the madness of my years I have worked pretty much full time from the age of 16. Today I volunteer for two substance misuse services that support people seeking, or who are in early, recovery. My home is clean and comfortable, no more the prison that I'd made it. I'm financially okay today. I enjoy friendships and keep socially active. Turning my life around and re-educating myself is fulfilling, and it gives me strength in the purpose that I now have in society

As a Mount Carmel graduate I stay close to the house through aftercare groups and one to one counselling sessions. These times are priceless to the clients who use them, people from before, during and after my time as resident. The ongoing aftercare is a testament to Mount Carmel's commitment to their clients.

### **I stood for Parliament, but ...**

I was in my fifties by the time I seriously sought help with what had, by then, become a hopeless case of compulsive alcohol and drug abuse. On reflection it seems amazing I'd made it that far; I had many friends in the graveyard – liver failure, accidental overdose and suicide – and had two friends in residential care with Korsakov's Syndrome ('wet brain' – irreversible brain damage caused by excessive consumption of alcohol).

Curiosity and 'the swinging sixties' had led me to experiment with alcohol and soft drugs in my teens and by my late teens I was an extremely enthusiastic user of anything going that would 'get me out of my head'. By my early twenties I was using heroin and cocaine intravenously. Over the next thirty-five years or more I rotated between compulsive heavy drinking, heroin addiction, cocaine addiction and methadone addiction (bought from registered addicts). By my mid-forties the frustrations of the drug black market had led me to become an alcoholic who smoked lots of 'dope' and dabbled in whatever was going from time to time.

What had started out as an expression of curiosity had become an indispensable social crutch and a necessary accessory to exuberance and had finally descended into a total dependence. Life had become impossible without alcohol and preferably some drugs.

And yet I was not a street drinker. Not a down and out. In my thirties and forties, as far as the world could see, I was a success. During that time I ran a successful business running training courses in a range of topics. I had contracts with the government, with Volvo, with Mercedes Benz – sometimes I even ran courses for social workers and probation officers telling them how to deal with kids who had drug problems! I had three kids of my own. A big house. I was a school governor. I coached kids' rugby. I stood for Parliament!

Being able to sustain a moderately successful life on the outside while increasingly degenerating into ever worsening compulsive drinking, supplemented by frequent drug use, seemed perfectly normal. It was helped by the fact that working self-employed on medium term contracts meant I never had to sustain long-term working relationships. To the outside world my behaviour looked perhaps bohemian and madcap, but no more. Problem drinking and illegal drug use is by no means confined to lower socio-economic groups. A couple of bottles of wine and a couple of 'joints' in the evening to relax, combined with heavy drinking 'coke snorting' dinner parties at the weekend, can be portrayed as nothing more than *joi de vivre* and a well deserved counter to hard work and pressure. There was no shortage of willing well-off comrades on the battlefield of intense drink and drug use.

But I knew. And so did my family. Putting up with endless and mounting bad temper and rows, embarrassing behaviour followed by tearful self-recrimination and remorse, led to those close to me increasingly asking me to seek help. I half-recognized I needed help nearly twenty years before I actually received and accepted the help I needed. Whether that was denial on my part or not being offered the kind of treatment I needed I will never know – a bit of both I suspect.

I tried all sorts – my GP referred me for counselling, supported controlled drinking, CBT, anxiety management and referrals to psychiatrists and I paid for all manner of different kinds of therapy out of my own pocket – the list is endless (I also tried AA ten years before I finally found recovery, and decided it wasn't for me).

If my compulsive drinking and drug-taking mounted slowly over the years, the collapse happened with breathtaking speed. I had managed 10 months unsupported (very bad-tempered) sobriety and abstinence. When I inevitably picked up the bottle again my partner of thirty plus years decided she had had enough. Over the next three years I lost her, my kids, my big house, I wrote off two cars, was hospitalized twice through serious suicide attempts, was investigated for threatening murder, fined for abusive behaviour, banned from driving, lost my reputation, and the work dried up!

My GP and the Drug and Alcohol Team of my local social services had run out of ideas. I was truculent with psychiatrists to whom I had been referred and tried to coerce friends into smuggling drugs and alcohol in to me when I was in a secure detox in Springfield mental hospital. I had bolted from hospital after being resuscitated from another suicide attempt for fear of being 'sectioned'.

I was pretty much a lost cause when I was accepted for treatment at Mount Carmel; it is still a mystery why I did not wind up in the graveyard or institutional care as so many of my friends had done. But the combination of intensive group work, tough love, cognitive restructuring, one-to-one counselling and compulsory attendance at meetings of AA achieved the seemingly miraculous. I have been free of drink and drugs for four years at the time of writing. With the help of Mount Carmel aftercare and continued attendance at and service in AA I have a 'life beyond my wildest dreams' – reunited with my children, engaged in socially valuable work, at peace with the world. The craving for drink or drugs has left me. In sobriety I have had to contend with cancer, bereavement, relationship break-up and a seriously ill daughter. Never once have I thought that a drink or drug would make that easier to contend with.

And it is Mount Carmel and AA I have to thank for that.