



This article was published in the Calgary Herald on October 25, 1984 and follows a Client's path from addiction to recovery. Like many women with addictions, Hilary's path was not a straight line. Relapse is not failure and is often part of the ongoing recovery journey. With the help of the CMHA, Renfrew Detox and The Villa, and her own strength and perseverance, Hilary graduated from the program. Through treatment, education and support in a safe environment, she was able to achieve her goal of living an addiction-free lifestyle.

## Fight for equality can be battle for life

By Suzanne Zwarun  
(Special to The Herald)

If you'd been hanging around the city's bus depot last fall, you might have run into Hilary.

You've seen faces like hers a thousand times, staring blankly at the smoke curling from a cigarette, wondering if tomorrow is worth the wait.

Hilary and a boyfriend had been heading from Edmonton to New Brunswick last September. He had an errand in Calgary and he'd taken her car, her \$150, and gone off to do it. He was to pick her up that afternoon at the bus depot.

Hilary waited for him until the depot closed that night. She'd spent her last 50 cents buying half a pack of cigarettes from a woman waiting for a bus. Depot staff wouldn't let her sleep in the washroom. Emergency welfare services finally arranged a room at the Y.

Hilary was back at the depot at 7 the next morning. She went back every day for two weeks, waiting for a man who never returned.

Sitting in her neat northside apartment kitchen this fall, Hilary talks about panhandling, selling kisses, living in an abandoned car.

She enjoyed some of it, she confesses. But she didn't have the dimpled smile she flashes now.

"When my attitude began to change, everything changed. I could see it in the mirror," she says. "I'm always getting compliments about my smile now."

At 38, Hilary has put her mind in order for the first time. This week, Tuesday, she celebrated her "one-year birthday," Alcoholic Anonymous' shorthand for one year's sobriety.

"I never finished anything I started before," she says. (She had touched wood during the interview when predicting she would make it to her birthday. An AA creed is "one day at a time.")

With two million members worldwide, AA is the most successful means invented of keeping alcoholics sober. You get a glimmer of just how complex that task is when you hear Hilary's story.

For almost 20 years, Hilary has been handed from man to man . . . from drinking man to drinking man. She has been put down, runaround, and she always came back for more abuse, trying to find in men whatever it was that was missing in her.

At Villa North, where women alcoholics are put through extensive counselling and lifeskills programs, Hilary found out for

the first time that "I am a good person. I can do things without the aid of alcohol."

Her husband wasn't one to encourage Hilary in anything. He fits the psychological profile of a battering husband, although he roughed her up only a few times.

Such men are constantly finding fault with their mates. They're jealous, with an obsession about being cheated on. They isolate their mates from friends and close family relations.

Wives of such men, according to the experts, are subject to severe depression and are at high risk to become drug and alcohol abusers.

She married her husband at 21, not because she loved him but because she was pregnant and she'd already had an out-of-wedlock child.

She went home to Slave Lake, from Edmonton where she'd been working as a waitress, to get married and her father must have seen something in her face. He talked to her the morning of the wedding, telling her she didn't have to go through with it. "But everybody had been invited, some were already there."

Hilary and her new husband had a fight at the wedding dance. They spent their wedding night in separate beds.

Their life together followed the pattern set on their wedding night. They were weekend drinkers then, didn't consider themselves alcoholics. But Hilary had trouble dealing with the stress of his jealousy, with his complaints when she got a job instead of staying home with, eventually, three daughters.

She got a prescription for Valium for her nerves. It made her feel so good she gained weight. So she went on to diet pills. The Amphetamines sent her so high, she had to take sleeping pills to come down at night. All those pills produced headaches, so piles of pain killers were prescribed.

It was 10 years before Hilary confessed to a doctor that she was hooked. He confiscated a purse full of pills, recommended hospitalization in Slave Lake or a treatment centre in Edmonton. Hilary didn't want to go, but agreed to attend AA meetings.

Her husband hit the roof. He didn't want people knowing his wife was a drug addict. Hilary sneaked out to meetings for a month before she all-too-happily bowed to her husband's wishes.

Hilary didn't have much trouble coming off drugs — she took up booze with a vengeance.



Larry MacDougal, Calgary Herald

### Now a whole person, perceptions have changed

The next few years are still pretty confused in Hilary's mind. She and a neighbor would drink all day, lamenting about their awful husbands. She hit the bars, figuring she might as well have the game since her husband gave her the name. She didn't hold jobs long; attempts to upgrade her education, to take the nursing course she had always wanted to take failed.

She took an overdose, ended up in Oliver for three months. Another overdose and she was back again, given shock treatments this time.

The blanks are punctuated with awful mental snapshots. Her husband dragged her home from a bar one night and, raging mad, she started to stuff down pills given her at Oliver. He knocked them out of her hands. "I was crawling around the floor, chasing these little pills and taking them." Neighbors phoned the police and it took two cops and her husband to wrestle her into the squad car.

"Everybody knew I had a problem but I was blaming everything on him, like he was a ogre. Now that I've gotten sober I know it isn't his fault the way he is. I don't know if I made him like that or he was like that all his life. He must have been through hell and the stupid ass is doing the same thing now, living with a woman hooked on drugs and booze."



She'd been sober since her last stay at Oliver, has regained the care of a foster son she'd looked after before and loved. Her husband didn't object to her staying weekdays in Edmonton for treatment — "I guess he was starting to be nice and I never noticed." But once she found herself in Edmonton, the cloud lifted. She found it was so nice to do what she wanted, talk to whom she wanted, without accusations and complaints.

"I met a guy and started drinking again. We had therapy in the mornings, then we'd drink all afternoon and night. I didn't think of the kids. All of a sudden I was thinking of me and no one else. That's how I got away from my husband, by staying with another big A-S-S."

Chaos enveloped Hilary's life. She and her new man blew \$10,000 in compensation payments in three months. His wife turned up, commandeered Hilary's clothes, stereo and television and the two departed, leaving Hilary crying on a sidewalk in Calgary.

She phoned her husband to come and get her, but she only stayed a week. Her children begged her to stay, but she was off again. A string of men followed. "I enjoyed his company," she says of one. And hungry for company, for a man who would take her places, talk to her, she let them do with her what they would — steal from her purse, sell her van and pocket the money, live off what money she made or got from welfare.

Her final weeks last fall in Calgary were one wild party. "What's panhandling?" she asked the street man who suggested she try it. She learned, and found she could make \$10 in half an hour. She'd stand on the sidewalk and offer to sell a kiss for \$1. "It works. At least it worked for me."

By the end, though, she

"looked like something out of the garbage."

She went to the Canadian Mental Health Association to beg pills. Instead, they wanted to discuss her drinking problem. "I was mad. How dare they say I had a problem with booze. So I went out and got pissed."

Mental Health sent her to detox but she hid out in a car with a man, giggling over a bottle while counsellors searched for her. Already on probation for theft, the impaired charge would land her in jail if she didn't agree, she was told.

She checked into the AA-DAC Detoxification Centre (Renfrew). "I only went to stay out of jail but after two weeks my attitude changed. They really make you take a look at yourself. I started to feel good about myself; I wanted to look nice, feel respectable."

Hilary then went into Villa North for treatment and on to Villa South, a halfway house. She is employed now as a cook at Villa North. She met a new man, a reformed alcoholic, and this time, she recognized when she started to cling to him. They're trying to forge an equal relationship. "I'm staring to do things on my own. If he has a life of his own and I have a life of my own, we can still be together. We're doing okay."

These past months, Hilary has been on a "natural high." She is looking forward to starting a dietitian's course in February. She is closer to being at peace with herself than she has ever been.

"I sure don't want to go back to that life," she says simply.

For alcoholics, that fight is never over. And Hilary is determined to keep on fighting.

*(Zwarun is a regular columnist in the Life Today section of The Calgary Herald).*