



Dirk's story

Dirk was born in October 1960 in Antwerp, in a middle class family with domestic problems. He dropped out of school and started working at the age of 14 years. His first experiments with drugs and alcohol began in his teenage years around the age of 16. By the time he was 18 years old he had already developed a taste for cocaine and drinking.

He met his first wife two years later, when he is 20. They remained together for 5 years and had one child. After the separation his child remained with his ex-wife. By the time of separation, he was familiar with heroin and occasionally shooting speed-balls (a combination of heroin and cocaine or similar). Not long after, Dirk met his second serious girlfriend. They stayed together for 5 years. In that time Dirk started working less and using more. The plethora of different drugs, with which he was experimenting become more abundant. He was already familiar with tobacco, alcohol, cocaine, heroin, pharmaceutical opioids and barbiturates.

In his 30s, in the beginning of the 90's he became a patient in De Sleutel clinic, where he started his regular intake of methadone, which he continues to take to date. After 1998 he left De Sleutel, to become a patient of VZW Free Clinic. In the VZW Free Clinic, he became involved, together with the founder, Tonny van Montfoort, in the B.A.D. Project, which is a "drug user union" fighting for, and establishing a softer narrative in society's perception of people who use drugs. The project existed from 2001 till 2005.

Also at in the early 90's he meets his last, and biggest love - Elisabeth. She was selling sex when he met her. Together they influenced and supported each other's drug habits. From that moment on, their daily dose of methadone was rising. Dirk was

not working anymore, relying on the social services and Elisabeth's efforts to support them. Their lifestyle led to a lot of negative physical effects for both of them. Their diet was poor, causing them to lose weight and leading to lack of energy and less and less activity. Depression, arthritis and hepatitis C infection.

Dirk often had money troubles, which also led to poor housing and living difficulties. Life became full of challenges. He stopped contact with his child and family. Due to complex combination of malnutrition, drug use and lack of movement his late wife, Elisabeth became at first immobile and later completely physically disabled. Due to high levels of ammonia in her brain she developed encephalopathy. They were planning to start treatment HCV treatment together, but because of Elisabeth's fear of hospitals, it was too late for her. After her death Dirk was devastated, but managed to pull himself out of the depression. He also developed encephalopathy.

With the help of CBuddies Project he enlisted for HCV treatment in the gastroenterology ward of Dr. Stefan Bourgeois, a very devoted professional in Belgium. Dirk received a lot of physical and moral support from CBuddies Project, which is a peer support group, staffed by people who have had HCV infection and support others through the process.

After 24 weeks Sofosbuvir, Daclatasvir and Ribavirin, Dirk was cured from his hepatitis C infection and turned his focus towards improving his mental health, hygiene and accepting the loss of his wife. He remembers her with pride despite their hardships.

Dirk continues to come daily for his methadone and bromazepam in the Free Clinic. And due to advice from Dr. Bourgeois, he has quit drinking alcohol and smoking tobacco. His companion is a 10-year-old dog, called Skippy, which he is with in his photo. Skippy is his best friend and moral support. The dog keeps him active and they both go on stimulating daily walks to the park and fresh air.

Dirk continues to come daily to Free Clinic and has been followed up by the CBuddies team and Dr. Bourgeois. His weight, hygiene, physical and mental health has been tremendously improved since he was cured from Hepatitis C. His liver scar tissue is regenerating well, returning his healthy skin colour and starting to build new reserves of fat in his metabolic system. He is thankful and proud. Already talking about finding a new wife.

By Stefan Bratovanov and Tonny van Montfoort, CBuddies Project 2017





The CBuddies team