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Chabad extends 'lifeline' to addicts at new centre

Janice Arnold
Staff Reporter

A drug education and counselling program rooted in the Lubavitch community, which began years ago as a modest campus project, has entered an expanded and more professional phase.

Chabad Lifeline, formerly Project Pride, officially inaugurated its new premises April 19 at 4615 Côte Ste. Catherine Rd., a gracious two-storey home dating back to the 1920s that's owned by the nearby Jewish General Hospital (JGH).

The house, which was empty for years, was the residence of the JGH's first executive director Samuel Cohen from 1933 to 1968.

Now fully renovated and its ample grounds attractively landscaped, the premises is a major improvement over Lifeline's most recent previous location: office space on Queen Mary Road. It's a comfortable setting for those who attend the 12-step self-help groups to overcome drug, alcohol or other addictions, or for support while in recovery.

Lifeline has developed a professional staff, headed by executive director Rabbi Ronnie Fine and director Rabbi Benjamin Bresinger, and it has attracted some major supporters, which bodes well for its future. Lifeline receives no financial aid from either government or any local Jewish organization, and many of its services are free of charge.

The program's new co-chairs are Heleena and Eddie Wiltzer and Lillian Vineberg. Her late husband Stephen, a past president of the JGH who passed away in February, played a major part in getting Chabad Lifeline to the point it is today.

"To us, the two rabbis are heroes," Heleena Wiltzer said, "because they are saving so many people."

Rabbi Fine, who founded Project Pride in 1989 while he was a McGill University chaplain, said Lifeline is now receiving more than 14,000 visits and holds 665 group sessions per year. You don't have to be Jewish to use its services, and the religious underpinnings are not overt.

Rabbi Bresinger said people are turning to Lifeline because of its open-door and non-judgmental approach.

It's successful in getting and keeping people off drugs and other harmful ways of life because Lifeline views addiction as "a disease for which there is a solution."

"Addiction is not a moral failing, but it still carries a stigma, which often prevents people from seeking help. Our message is that, once you contact us, you never have to be alone again."

The idea that addiction is a treatable disorder "like any other" was echoed by JGH executive director Dr. Hartley Stern, who spoke at the opening.

Lifeline's clinical director is the rabbi's wife, Karen Bresinger, who holds a master's degree in social work from Rutgers University.



From left, Chabad Lifeline co-chairs Heleena Wiltzer, left, Lillian Vineberg and Eddie Wiltzer pose with the centre's leaders, rabbis Benjamin Bresinger and Ronnie Fine, in front of paintings by Montreal artist Haim Sherrf.

It does not provide treatment as such, but crisis intervention and referral to centres that do. Its role is primarily support both for the substance abuser and their family – "the hidden victims." There are support groups for them, too, including Al-Anon and parenting meetings.

Interestingly, Lifeline has become something of a specialist in sex addiction. On its staff is Jennifer Kotry, introduced as one of only two certified sex addiction therapists in Quebec. Lifeline currently runs weekly group therapy for such addicts and a separate program for their partners.

Speaking at the opening were two former drug and alcohol abusers, who credit Lifeline with literally saving "Cindy" began drinking at age 12 and soon was also doing drugs, including crack cocaine. After 25 years of abuse and "self-pity," she said, Lifeline got her into treatment and has provided her with support over the past six years. During that time, she has spoken to about 2,400 students in schools about her experience.

"Gianni" said he went to Lifeline three years ago when he had nowhere else to go, reluctantly because he thought it would be strange to turn to a place run by rabbis.

"Their arms were open from the minute I came in. It didn't matter to them who I was or what I had done." Four days later, counsellors had him on a bus for a 13-hour trip to a treatment centre in Ontario.

He's been clean since, and out of gratitude, he also volunteers at the centre. "I work long hours as a landscaper, but whatever they asked me to do, I do it," Gianni said.

For more information, call 514-738-7700, or visit www.chabadlifeline.com.