

Balance and Harmony

Sunrise Native Addictions Services – Calgary, Alberta

Walterⁱ ate from the garbage. He slept by the riverbank. He lost his wife and family and was sent to jail. He was an alcoholic living on the streets of Calgary for almost ten years.

“People ask me if I really did all of those things,” says Walter. “They can’t see it in me now because of the changes I’ve made.”

Walter’s transformation started 20 years ago, around the time he participated in an addiction-counselling program with Sunrise Native Addictions Services in Calgary. He overcame his addiction a few years later after two previous attempts.

“I looked at myself through the four areas of the medicine wheel – the emotional, mental, physical and spiritual,” explains Walter when asked what made him successful on his third try. “I didn’t want to look at the spiritual for the longest time, but when I did I was able to sober up.”

A similar emphasis on connecting people to their culture has produced a high success rate for Sunrise.

“We survey our clients three months after they graduate from our programs,” says Director Eve MacMillan. “95% have remained abstinent or have improved their lifestyle.”

Sunrise provides residential treatment, healing, counselling, and outpatient services for thousands of Calgarians each year. Fifteen years ago they hired Walter and he is now a Residential Supervisor and Culture Coordinator for Sunrise.

“My background really helps me a lot,” says Walter. “I’ve been through the mill so I know what it’s like.”

The new Sunrise building was recently completed, with funding from the National Homelessness Initiative, increasing the number of treatment beds and better accommodating people with disabilities.

The building features a striking blend of contemporary and traditional Native architecture, symbolizing the approach that Walter takes in his work with his clients. Every Monday evening Walter conducts a traditional pathways program that encourages people to find a balance between contemporary and traditional Native ways.

“For so long there was only the one way. Now we can follow both, including the Native way.”

Walter is remarried, happy, and compassionate in his work. He frequently speaks in public about addiction and the lessons he has learned.

Like the building he works in, Walter has found balance and harmony.

Like the organization he works for, he is eager to help others find their way.

ⁱ No names have been changed. Permission was given by all individuals in the story.