



# *A Destined Haven for a New Life*

Story Marilyn Collins

Destiny Haven is a live-in residential program for women with life controlling issues where emotional, spiritual, social, intellectual and practical needs are dealt with enabling those who walk through the doors to establish and fulfill their own unique destiny. Destiny is not a matter of chance, it's a matter of choice.

**S**et in a peaceful Hunter Valley location between Clarence Town and Dungog is a special place of safety which offers healing and restoration of broken lives for women wanting to reclaim their life and to reach their full potential and true destiny.

Destiny Haven is a ministry of "Designed for Destiny", a charitable organisation offering a long term womens' residential living-skills centre and life-developing training program operated by Janine Epere and husband Lewis, both of whom have overcome a severe and debilitating drug addiction themselves. Janine Epere was a deserving recent finalist in the 2009 Steel Magnolia Awards and her story is certainly an inspirational one.

Fifteen years ago they reclaimed their own lives and now assist people with similar issues. They jointly manage "Destiny Haven", which takes in women aged from 18 years and upwards, offering counselling, support and training. Together with their board they have raised funds to purchase a 42-acre property to continue their life's purpose.

Janine is a vivacious and attractive mother of three young teenagers and it is hard to imagine that once she herself was a hopeless drug addict and dealer on the streets of Kings Cross with a \$1000 a day drug habit. As the daughter of a minister, she was born into a Christian family – her parents were full-time Christian workers with a world-wide mission that held quite narrow views of life.





Janine was (and still is) a very talented song writer and singer who was highly-sought around the country.

The downsize of her success and undoing was being introduced to the drug culture within the music industry at the time. At the age of nineteen years, under contract with Castle Music (EMI's Publishing division), she was earning top money and started to dabble with marijuana and alcohol, gradually excluding religion from her life.

By the age of 24 years she was daily using a cocktail of drugs including cocaine and heroin because they were associated with the lifestyle in which she was involved.

She had success, money and good looks and gradually became involved in selling heroin for a large drug syndicate in Sydney to sustain her own habit.

After being arrested in a set-up selling drugs to an undercover policeman, her father appealed to the court on her behalf and she was released into his care. While awaiting sentence, she entered the Salvation Army Rehabilitation Centre admitting to her addiction.

"I felt I was above the common drug addict and was there for the wrong reasons," said Janine. After 12 months in rehab she was granted a good behaviour bond, but with the threat of gaol removed she eventually returned to drugs.

In 1990, at the age of 30, she met her husband-to-be, Lewis, in a hotel where they both sold drugs. He had been involved with gangs in New Zealand. Alcohol was part of his

family life and as a teenager he used marijuana and LSD.

Eventually the couple found themselves at Kings Cross selling heroin. Their own drug use had escalated to such a degree that they both knew they would be gaoled or die if they did not do something to alter the situation. Then Janine was arrested again. They moved to Port Macquarie, thinking that a geographical change would solve their problem and it would be all right as long as they were away from drugs. They stopped using heroin, as Janine discovered she was pregnant, but were still addicted to marijuana and alcohol.

After their daughter was born they resumed heroin use and drug dealing. They married in 1994 and almost destroyed themselves as their whole days revolved around getting, selling and taking any drug they could lay their hands on.

Their physical and emotional health deteriorated drastically and their marriage was on the rocks. They could see no future for themselves or their union and hopelessness set in.

"I then remembered visiting a place near Coffs Harbour when I was eighteen, called "Sherwood Cliffs", a rehabilitation centre which took families in, and asked my father to contact them to see if they could accept us," recalled Janine.

"Dad said I had to make that call myself and thank God they said they would take us in. On arrival I weighed 39kgs and we were both on death's door – one of the staff were later to intimate that on seeing us, their comment was: "Looked what the cat dragged in. Those two will never make it".





It was during their year long stay at Sherwood Cliffs that Janine rediscovered God's forgiveness and unconditional love for her. As Lewis observed the dramatic changes in Janine, although at first reluctant, he also became a Christian.

*Together they found the strength and made the conscious decision never to use alcohol or any other drug again and meant it, even when temptations came their way.*

They undertook a three-year degree course at Bible College and by this time they had three children. For part of their third year of College, the family lived in Spain, and the couple worked at a drug rehabilitation centre for people who had lived on the rubbish dumps of Madrid.

On returning to Australia, they returned to Sherwood Cliffs, this time as full-time staff and counsellors helping those who had travelled the same path they had done many years previous. They worked as unpaid volunteers for those entire three years, whilst studying and gaining professional counselling qualifications.

"We always had a passion to one day establish a similar centre, especially catering for women to regain their life," said Janine.

"Then one day a minister from Raymond Terrace visited Sherwood Cliffs and seeing our passion to minister to broken women told us of his church-owned property on 42 acres in the Hunter and invited us to come and pioneer a ministry to women there," said Janine. >







The property had been vacant for five years and previously had been a residential centre for developmentally delayed men. Besides the main facility, there were two homes on the site accommodating the manager and assistant manager and their family.

In agreeing to do so, Janine and Lewis stipulated that the centre was to be established as a faith ministry and all staff were to be volunteers.

"There is a reason for this. The women who come to Destiny Haven know that the staff are there because they want to be, not because it is a job. Broken people are very perceptive. They know if they are loved unconditionally or "put up with", said Janine.

The doors opened in February, 2007 run by the grace of God, goodwill and voluntary donations from supporters.

Co incidentally, throughout those past fifteen years, Julia Smith, Chaplain of Dungog Hospital, had been following the Epere's story through newsletters from Sherwood Cliffs and was totally amazed to read that they were relocating to virtually "around the corner" from her nearby home. She was one of the first people to donate her services and has volunteered her skills as a PA to Janine running the office and day-to-day administration since inception of the centre.

During the latter part of last year, Janine, Lewis and their board were presented with another challenge after learning that the church was withdrawing from the project, presenting them with two options: either to purchase the property outright or leave and abandon the programme altogether. With no funds on hand, the situation was desperate.

"Amazingly, our prayers were answered with donations coming in from unexpected generous benefactors, many of whom had been following our story and believed in the centre's role and purpose," said Janine. "We were able to raise more than \$550,000 and with a loan secured from Maitland Mutual Building Society we purchased the property at a reduced amount from the initial price and secured the ongoing future of the ministry."

In March this year, "Destiny Haven" became a self-supporting interdenominational organisation and a faith ministry, meaning that staff, both full time residentials and others, are all unpaid volunteers and the centre is not funded by the government.

At present, there are eight women in residence undergoing the full-time residential program. From their social security pension each fortnight, they allocate \$200 a week for full board and food, which includes counselling sessions.

During the hours I personally spent at the centre, I was privileged to meet this amazing couple who so frankly and honestly shared their story - warts and all, and came away completely in awe of their unselfish desire to turn lives around knowing they have been there themselves. Their story must strike a chord with those women whom they are trying to rehabilitate.

The weekly program involves one-on-one counselling, regular group sessions and a monthly Sunday service. With her musical background, music plays an integral part in the day's activities. Janine plays keyboard and piano and a number of the girls play guitar and are teaching others.

The centre strives to be self-sufficient and cost-effective with chooks, home-grown vegetables and herbs. A roster system includes life skills such as cooking, cleaning and gardening, budgeting and managing financial affairs and paying outstanding debts so the women can become more responsible for their own lives.

Destiny Haven is truly a home away from home as everyone including the entire Epere family and the assistant manager's sit down to meal times all together as a family.

To raise much-needed on-going funding, Janine and others on staff are continuing to develop a cottage industry teaching the skills of making superb quality beaded jewellery and craft items, home made jams, chutneys and chilli relishes, Belgium Chocolate rocky road and Christmas puddings made under the name of "Destiny Delights" and "Destiny Designs". As one of her current residents is a trained chef, they will shortly commence catering for special events, the first being finger food for a cocktail party for 100 guests.

The local suppliers generously offer cost-price fruit and vegetables and bread and local farmers donate fruit when in season to make the jams which are sold throughout the district.

Many of the women have never cooked or done anything like this in their lives, as many have come off the street, some have children in the care of foster parents or with relatives, but all have a common goal to get their lives back and re-enter and contribute to society.





*Janine works with her “Diamonds” as she refers to the women 24/7 with an amazing resilience, passion, understanding and unconditional love.*

During my visit, six desperate calls came within three hours seeking admission to the program, highlighting the high demand for such a facility.

Before acceptance, a 15-page application form has to be downloaded from the website and completed, which is followed up by a more in-depth telephone interview.

“We know the right questions to ask and most importantly everyone has to have gone through a detox programme before entering our program, including cigarette smoking as all stimulants are banned,” says Janine.

“We ask for a commitment of at least a four months stay as it takes at least three months to begin to break long term unhealthy cycles. Some girls arrive but they are not really ready to commit and sadly leave prematurely, even after a few days. Others have been with us for more than 12 months. As the women progress, they are granted day leave, then weekend leave and towards the end of their stay, they are allowed to attend TAFE courses in order to obtain skills that will help them find employment on completion of the program.

Meanwhile any escorted venture out is always well supervised and girls are given a **buddy**.”

Due to the increasing number staying at the house, transport is an issue and there is a desperate need for a 22-seater bus for trips to medical appointments and shopping, as currently four vehicles are needed for outings.

The bedroom accommodation is built around a sunny open courtyard and is shared. Everyone is responsible for their own washing and cleaning duties.

Physical fitness is part of the routine with Friday designated for sport. Supervised regular walks are held on and off the property and there is water aerobics in the pool during summer months.

Saturdays are leisure times with an open invitation to a relaxed evening barbecue extended to the general community and any visitors (BYO meat). Internet is out-of-bounds during the early months as is the outside influence of daily television. However TV and movies are a treat reserved for Friday nights and Sundays.

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Janine works with her “Diamonds” as she refers to the women 24/7 with an amazing resilience, passion, understanding and unconditional love. Her door is always open. Her passion, of course, is shared in partnership with husband Lewis and also their three children, as everyone is part of the family centre.

Special in-house evenings are held such as themed dress-up nights to create a comradeship and to show how one can have fun without stimulants, drugs or alcohol.

To witness the changes in the girls’ lives is incredible and at the recent celebration of the centre’s new identity, many former clients returned and inspired others with the stories of how they turned their life around, gained qualifications, secured jobs and created a family life for their children.

This said, it takes a great deal of courage and work to reach this stage on everyone’s part; to earn trust and ownership of one’s life decisions. The caring and experienced staff assists the women in achieving their true destiny and potential and set them on a journey towards freedom and renewal.



## How You Can Help:

Destiny Haven is a non-profit organisation registered under “Designed for Destiny Trading as Destiny Haven” and as such, any financial gifts over the amount of \$2.00 are tax deductible.

There is always a need for quality furnishings and household items and whitegoods, farm machinery and gardening implements, either as a donation or as a loan. There is also need of good quality lounge room furniture and kitchen equipment.

The main centre is being renovated and interested individuals or groups may be interested in “sponsoring a room.” This could mean either donating the finances to renovate a room or being more “pro-active” by choosing a suitable colour scheme and purchasing the necessary items to match.

Tax deductible donations can be made to “Designed for Destiny” and mailed to Destiny Haven, P.O. Box 106, Clarence Town, 2321. Ph (02) 4996 5888 or made by direct deposit to: Maitland Mutual Building Society (BSB: 646 000). Account No: 100043572, Account Name: “Designed for Destiny” if requiring receipt (please make sure that internet deposits state your name.)

**For further information visit:**

[www.destinyhaven.org.au](http://www.destinyhaven.org.au) or phone 4996 5558.