A man and a woman are sitting together in a grassy field. The man, on the left, is wearing a blue and white plaid shirt and jeans, smiling broadly. The woman, on the right, is wearing a black top over an orange shirt and jeans, also smiling. They are both looking towards the camera. The background is a soft-focus landscape with trees and a fence.

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# W

weekender

**HUNGRY  
BEASTS**

Men, sex  
and scandal

**HIP TO BE  
SQUARE**

Glorifying  
geekiness

# HAVEN OF HOPE

From the mean streets to salvation





COVER  
STORY

# FULL CIRCLE

At their lowest ebb, Janine and Lewis Epere could not have imagined themselves in an idyllic setting offering similarly troubled souls peace, love and understanding . . . and a second chance. ALISON BRANLEY writes.



To meet Janine and Lewis Epere it's hard to imagine the friendly pair used to be drug dealers on the mean streets of Kings Cross.

It is certainly a long way from their rural property nestled among the sleepy rolling hills between Clarence Town and Dungog.

But it was in the Cross that they began their journey through reconciliation, rehabilitation and salvation.

Janine Epere was in some ways an unlikely addict, but in other ways, a prime candidate.

She was born into a Christian family and the daughter of a minister.

Her parents were Christian workers with a worldwide mission, and in such a strict environment rebellion was almost a duty.

However, she was also a talented songwriter and by age 19 was under contract with EMI's publishing division, Castle Music, and earning good money.

It was in this music world that she started to dabble with marijuana and alcohol.

By 24 she had become a regular heroin user and, like many addicts, Janine started selling heroin to fund her habit.

Pretty soon she was caught selling drugs by an undercover police officer and ended up before the courts.

Rehabilitation followed, but it was only a pit-stop in Janine's downward spiral.

She says that before this point her drug use had been "high class" and she felt above regular addicts.

"I thought I reached rock bottom in 1989 after being arrested selling half an ounce of rock heroin," she says.

"But there's always a deeper rock bottom.

"All my motivation for being in that [rehabilitation] program was getting out of going to jail.

"In the following four years I did things I said I would never do.

"When I went back to drugs I was a drug dealer living in Kings Cross in a hovel, selling drugs to prostitutes, and taking prostitutes' things and stealing off my own parents.

"Rock bottom is quite relative."

When she was 30 Janine met Lewis in a hotel where they both sold drugs.

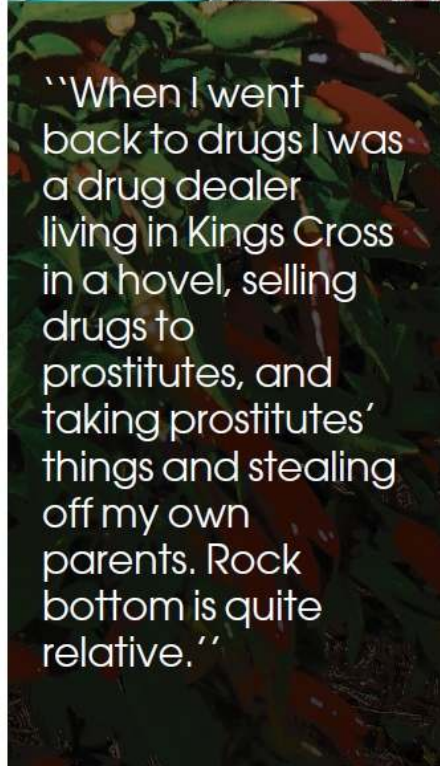
New Zealand-born Lewis had been involved with gangs in his home country and as a teenager used marijuana and LSD.

When Janine was arrested again, the pair moved to Port Macquarie hoping it would help them change. While they stopped using heroin, the alcohol and marijuana use continued, even while Janine was pregnant.

The heroin use started up again after their daughter came, and their relationship deteriorated. Despair set in.

It was then Janine remembered Sherwood Cliffs in Coffs Harbour, a place that took in families in trouble. It was this kind of place she would ultimately set up herself for others in trouble.

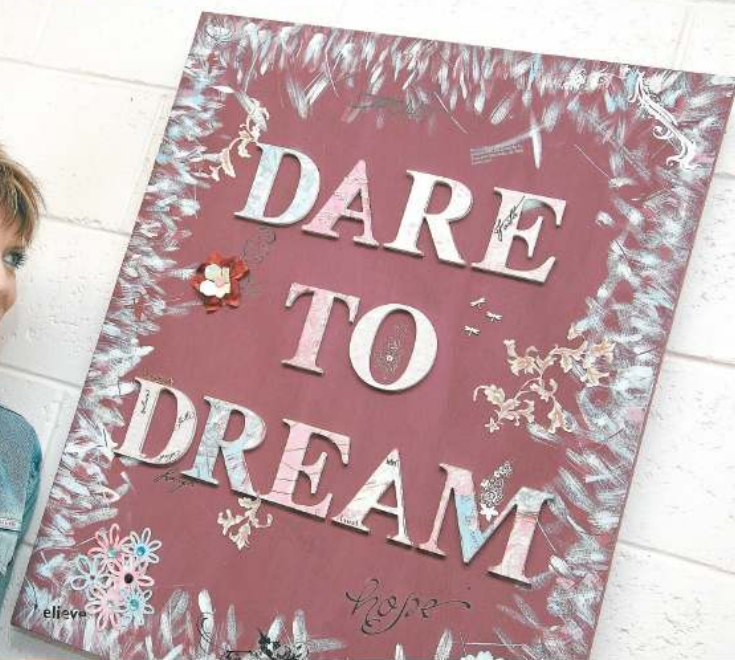
Along the way the couple found God and



went to Bible college. They worked in Spain at a drug rehabilitation centre for people who had lived on the rubbish dumps of Madrid.

They returned as volunteers at Coffs Harbour while they studied for counselling qualifications.

While they were working at Sherwood Cliffs, Colin Haddow, a minister from the Terrace Christian Life Centre, at Raymond Terrace, visited the centre and got to know the couple.



**DON'T GIVE UP:** Above, Janine Epere.

Opposite page, Lewis and Janine Epere and volunteer Kathryn Jontulovic in the gardens at Destiny Haven.

PICTURES: PHIL HEARNE

On hearing about their desire to help women in need, he offered the use of a church-owned property at Clarence Town.

The property was formerly a residential centre for developmentally delayed men but had been unused for five years.

The church withdrew from the project after a year, and Destiny Haven now stands on its own as a charity.

Destiny Haven took in its first residents in 2007, with a mission to help women who had lost their way.

It not only takes in drug and alcohol addicts but pregnant teens, women with eating disorders, women who self-harm, have depression or prescription medication addictions.

"It takes a lot of courage to come to a place like this," Janine says. "It takes a lot more courage to stay.

"Drugs, alcohol, cutting, anorexia, they are never the problems, they are the symptoms.

"Drugs and alcohol help mask the feelings we do not want to face."

The success of the centre comes about largely through the help of volunteers.

For Janine, this is crucial, because she believes the damaged and abused need to be loved unconditionally, not just by those getting paid to care.

"The first thing we provide is unconditional love and acceptance," she says.

"A lot of places will say they offer that but you're living day-to-day with the





same people and they love and accept you, regardless.

"Most places have staff that come and go.

"Here, there's a genuine desire to want to see the girls come through."

However, the centre needs more.

Its current volunteer numbers mean it can only host about 10 girls at a time, even though it has the capacity to house more.

Ultimately the centre would like to be able to take families, or mothers and children.

Most of the girls stay at least four months, some more than a year.

"For a few months you can keep the facade up but eventually as deeper feelings come up that's when you have got to push through," Janine says.

"They're here because their life is out of control, because of all the things in their life that are unresolved."

Most girls say the centre's family atmosphere is part of its success.

Janine and Lewis live on the property with their three children, eat and socialise with the girls.

"It's an extended family," Janine says.

It's not easy to get in. Applicants have to fill out a 15-page application form and pass a telephone interview.

They have to go through a detox program before coming because all stimulants are banned. So are mobile phones.

The centre has been open four years but first came to public attention when it was featured on Channel Nine's *Secret Millionaire* television program in 2009.

The secret millionaire who visited Destiny Haven was Derek Leddie, who had taken a year off work after selling his market research company The Leading Edge. Derek spent three days at the property under the guise of making a documentary. At the end, he surprised the centre with a donation of \$30,000.

The gift was on the condition that Destiny Haven continue to do more towards becoming financially sustainable. The publicity also helped the centre attract other benefactors.

On its road to sustainability, the centre makes jewellery for craft stalls and sells its jams, chillies, pickles, Christmas puddings and rocky road at markets around the region.

The centre has a large vegetable patch and chooks, and runs art therapy programs, gym and sports programs.

It has in-house theme nights to show the girls they can have fun without drugs and alcohol.

Towards the end of their stay women are granted more freedom to go on outings and begin study.

Besides teaching girls living skills such as cooking and cleaning, there is a value put on the worth of each person's well being.

For instance: "A lot of the girls have never had a birthday so we make a big thing of their birthday," Janine says.

It has galvanised the surrounding community.

A nearby general practitioner donated 10 cows and a bull for the farm to breed from, and an expert in agriculture comes by once a week to work on their vegetable farm.

Nearby farmers sell them cost-price fruit, vegetables and bread for living needs, and

donate in-season produce to help make jams.

There couldn't be a discussion of Janine and Lewis's work without reference to their faith.

Christianity is an important part of the centre and prayer is part of many girls' recovery. But it is not essential – girls do not have to be Christian to attend.

All things considered, it's been worth the effort.

"For four years I think we have done pretty well," Janine says.

"They're beautiful girls and for one reason or another they've gone off the path."

**K**athryn Jontulovic is one of the haven's success stories.

She was a middle-class girl from Sydney's north shore who got into the party scene and kept partying.

When she arrived at Destiny Haven in November 2009 she had a court date ahead of her and was dubbed the centre's "little princess".

"I just wanted to break away from Mum and Dad and see there was a life outside of living on the north shore," she says.

"I just started with normal things, going to clubs.

"I always had rules. No really bad drugs, no shooting up, just clubbing drugs."

But when she started going out with a drug dealer, things took an ugly dive.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

- ❑ Make a donation to "Designed for Destiny" and mail to Destiny Haven, PO Box 106, Clarence Town, 2321.
- ❑ Volunteer time on the farm, supervising girls or running programs.

- ❑ Donate furnishings, household items, whitegoods, farm machinery or gardening implements.
- ❑ Visit [destinyhaven.org.au](http://destinyhaven.org.au) or phone 4996 5558.





**SUCCESS STORIES:** From far left, volunteer Jen Whittington, (inset below: Jen when she arrived at Destiny Haven in September 2007); Janine Epere with some of the products made at Destiny Haven; volunteer Kathryn Jontulovic; Kathryn Jontulovic, Janine and Lewis Epere, and Jen Whittington have all turned their lives around.

PICTURES: PHIL HEARNE AND SIMONE DE PEAK

"Then my family life fell apart, my whole world crashed around me, and drugs seemed the best thing," she says.

She took a job as a nanny in Newcastle but ended up living in Singleton in her car.

One night, in a near-psychotic state, she saw the story about Destiny Haven on *Secret Millionaire*.

"Something inside of my mind made me write down the name Destiny Haven," she says. "After that, I tried to kill myself. I was arrested. They sent me to Maitland psychiatric [unit] and I said 'the only place that's going to save me is this place [Destiny Haven]'."

Kathryn was at the centre for more than a year and then returned to work as a volunteer while studying an advanced diploma in counselling.

"There was a time in the period before I came here when I thought I had ruined my life to the point where there was nowhere else to go," she says.

"That's what Destiny Haven gave me back. It gave me back opportunity.

"It helped me see my life has a purpose."

She says community

atmosphere is a strength of the centre.

"You're given the opportunity to grow," she says. "It's an extended family."

If it wasn't for Destiny Haven she says she "definitely wouldn't be here".

"They loved me back when even my parents couldn't love me," she says.

"I'm facing things I didn't ever think I would be able to face and have the courage to go on. It has just made me learn to live my life again."



"They loved me back when even my parents couldn't love me."

Jen Whittington initially came to the centre as a volunteer in September 2007 but pretty soon had to admit she had not conquered her own eating disorder.

"I had been at a program myself and I thought I was healed," she says.

"Being in this environment you can't help but get undone. You can't help but realise your life's in a mess.

"You actually have to start to be honest with yourself."

At her lowest Jen weighed 33 kilograms and was forced to admit her life was in chaos.

"My whole life revolved around food, weight and laxatives," she says.

"When I couldn't control my eating disorder, or

when that was taken off me, I started to self-harm. When I couldn't self-harm I overdosed and when I couldn't do that I would go back to the eating disorder."

After stripping back the layers Jen discovered that her eating disorder was really a symptom of childhood sexual abuse.

"Because I didn't want to face that, I just started to push it down," she says.

"An eating disorder became a way to control my life."

She decided to use Destiny Haven as an opportunity to nail her problems for good.

"It wouldn't have been much time before I went down to those low weights again," she says. "I think I would have died. If I didn't die physically I would have died spiritually."

Having completed an advanced diploma in counselling, she is now working towards qualifications in community services, specialising in dealing with alcohol and drug use.

Jen says eating disorders are one of the hardest things to recover from.

"Recovery is possible. There is hope."

Christianity played a role in her recovery.

"I went through the hospital system, since I was 15," she says. "Their answer to everything was another pill.

"Here I started to learn about my worth to Jesus."

Jen has been a full-time volunteer at the centre for more than two years.

"I know now it's not all about me," she says.

"Before it was all about me, what I could get from people and how I could get it.

"I want to help people instead of people helping me. Destiny [Haven] is my family."

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