



*Pictured: Pictured Founders Lewis and Janine with their daughter Jess Epere.*

# Destiny Haven... Five Years On

STORY AND IMAGES MARILYN COLLINS

After facing many challenges Destiny Haven, a charitable organisation offering a womens' residential life development training program has celebrated five successful years of operation.

**S**et in a peaceful Hunter Valley location between Clarence Town and Dungog this special place of safety restores the broken lives of women (of all ages) wanting to reclaim their lives to reach their full potential and true destiny.

From a place that people were once uncertain was a good thing to have in their 'backyard', Destiny Haven has proven to be an awarded community asset to the local Clarence Town and Dungog community.

Founders Janine Epere and husband Lewis, jointly manage "Destiny Haven", which takes in women aged from 18 years and upwards, offering counselling, unconditional acceptance, support and training.

The couple believes it has always been their life's purpose to create such a centre. Backed by a Board of Directors and with financial support from benefactors. Destiny Haven obtained a bank mortgage which allowed them to raise the funds to purchase the 42-acre property.

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

"There is a reason for this," explains Janine. "The women who come to Destiny Haven know that Lewis and I and the rest of the staff are here because we want to be, not because it is just a paid job."

All volunteers have a passion to see lives changed. "We don't work 9am-5pm or shifts with rostered days off, so there is always the continuity of care. We live together as an extended family giving love and care to make a change."

One of those loyal volunteers Julia Smith, was one of the first people to donate her services and her skills as PA to Janine running the office and day-to-day administration since inception of the centre. Julia has just turned 70 and she is a testament to the fact that you are never too old to contribute to the lives of others. Her presence has encouraged other "seniors" to put their hand up and volunteer a day or two a week. ►





Above: Kathryn Jontulovic heads the chocolate making programme holds a tray of tempting handmade delights.

Since the doors opened in February, 2007 many generous people have made donations to help pay the mortgage.

For those who believe that miracles do happen – here is tangible proof. Destiny Haven was selected as one of the charities to be visited by a secret millionaire screened on national television under the same name.

At the end of the visit the millionaire presented the couple with a cheque for \$30,000.

This invaluable gift went towards fencing, expanding the vegetable garden and building an art studio/craft room allowing the good work of Destiny Haven to continue into the future.

Another generous benefactor gave \$200,000 (towards building a new staff house and repaying the mortgage) as well as giving wise counsel over the two years of his involvement with Destiny Haven.

The women in residence undergo a full-time residential program. From their Centrelink benefit they allocate three quarters towards full board, food and weekly counselling sessions. There is an “in house” boutique of quality donated clothing which can fit out new residents as many arrive with hardly any clothing or personal belongings.

“Everyone who joins the program has to have gone through a detox programme, including cigarette smoking as all stimulants are banned,” says Janine.

“Our program is six to twelve months duration. Our experience has shown that it takes at least three months for a person to begin to break long term unhealthy cycles of behaviours. 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 they progress, they are granted day leave, then weekend leave and towards the end of their stay, they are encouraged to attend TAFE courses in order to obtain skills that will help them find employment on completion of the program. On completion, some have returned to undertake traineeships through Destiny or to volunteer full or part time.

During the early part of the program any escorted venture out is always well supervised and girls are given a “buddy”.

The weekly program involves one-on-one counselling, regular group sessions and a monthly Sunday service. With Janine’s musical background as singer and songwriter, music plays an integral part in each day’s activities. Janine plays keyboard and piano; a number of 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, gardening, budgeting, 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. Everyone including the entire Epere family and volunteers sit down to meal times 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, delicious homemade jams, chutneys and chilli relishes, Callabaut Belgian Chocolate delights and Christmas puddings (made under the name of “Destiny Delights”) as well as pyjamas and sewn bags (under “Destiny Designs”).

Many of the women have never cooked 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 find freedom from their life controlling issues and re-enter and contribute to society.

The future long-term goal of the Eperes is to be debt-free of just over \$200,000 bank loan and a \$200,000 interest free loan (due to be repaid in 2014).

Just as significant is the completion of the nearly finished staff house which will accommodate two couples who are waiting to come on board to work with the program as support staff.

Having another staff couple would enable the centre to bring more women into the program increasing from the current 8-10 women to an additional 5-6.



Lewis and Janine's dream includes having the chance to rent or to purchase a half-way house close by where the exiting women can live. A half way house would provide support while encouraging more independence; a place where women can learn to live within the community whilst studying TAFE courses, childcare, cookery and training for other potential careers. They would be close enough to Destiny to be accountable to their new found freedom.

Saturdays are leisure times with an open invitation extended to everyone to enjoy a relaxed evening barbecue (BYO meat).

To witness the changes in the girls' lives is incredible. At the five year celebration held at Destiny Haven on Saturday March 10, many former clients returned showing how they have turned their lives around, gained qualifications, secured jobs and created a new family life.

Today, living on site, are girls who have been through the program and are now holding positions of trust, responsibility and management by overseeing the running of many innovative programs which produce a steady income such as handmade chocolates and catering for monthly bus trips to Destiny.

It takes a great deal of courage and work to reach this stage of development; to earn trust and ownership of one's life decisions. The caring and experienced staff assist the women in achieving their true destiny and potential setting them on a journey towards freedom and renewal.

Supporters attending the celebrations were given a list of materials required to complete the new staff residence - ranging from plasterboard, paint, doors, to ceiling fans, bath, stove, carpets, plumbing, down to linen. Any business willing to offer assistance can contact Lewis or Janine on the numbers below. ☎



*The newly built manager's residence will have the final internal fit out once monies are raised to complete the project.*

## Donations Welcome!

Tax deductible donations can be made to "Destiny Haven", P.O. Box 106, Clarence Town, 2321.

Phone: (02) 4996 5888 or make a by direct deposit:

Maitland Mutual Building Society (BSB: 646 000).

**Account No:** 100043573,

**Account Name:** "Destiny Haven"

*(if requiring receipt please make sure that the EFT includes your name).*

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