

# Weekend **MAGAZINE**



IN THIS HOUSE...  
WE DO REAL  
WE DO MISTAKES  
WE DO I'M SORRY  
WE DO SECOND CHANCES  
WE DO FUN  
WE DO HUGS  
WE DO FORGIVENESS  
WE DO REALLY LOUD  
WE DO FAMILY  
WE DO LOVE.

*SANCTUARY FOR WOMEN: Janine Epere who co-founded Destiny Haven at Clarence Town.*

*Pictures by STUART SCOTT 300413SS196*

## THE HOUSE OF SECOND CHANCES

It's never too late for a second chance – just ask Janine and Lewis Epere. The couple spent years battling their own addictions before setting up a safe haven on the outskirts of Clarence Town. Michelle Meehan reports.

A poster has been stuck on a door in the main house at Destiny Haven. It is a simple thing, black words on a white background, but its 11 short lines of text strike at the heart of what the residential life skills training program run on the picturesque 17-hectare property is all about.

The poster speaks of family, it speaks of love. It speaks of mistakes, forgiveness and second chances.

Most of all, it symbolises the feeling of hope offered to the women, young and old, who grasp the door's handle and bravely walk through into a world of self-examination, truth and – ultimately – healing.

"The DNA of this place really is love and acceptance, unconditional love and acceptance," Janine Epere, who co-founded Destiny Haven with her husband Lewis, said.

"Everybody deserves to be safe, to belong and to know that they're loved

and accepted regardless of whether they behave badly.

"You need to know that there's somewhere for me, there's hope, that life is possible, that there's something different out there."

It's this dream of a different life that reached out to former pre-school teacher and drug user Kathryn Jontulovic one night while she was lying in a near psychotic drug-induced state, in a motel room in Singleton.

She remembers seeing a story about Destiny Haven on the television and scrawling the name on the back of a wine bar menu, which fortunately she had with her when she was arrested the next day.

Kathryn said if it hadn't been for the Eperes, she would have ended up in jail. Instead she worked through the issues behind her drug use, graduated from the program and stayed on as a volunteer to help other women.

*continued page 16*



# A haven for women

from page 15

She is now the assistant manager of Destiny Haven and is preparing to get married in a few weeks to a man she met while fund-raising for the charitable organisation.

"It gave me a place to really safely unravel and taught me that there were second chances," Kathryn said.

"I was living in my car, I had numerous charges up against me and I would be serving a jail term [if I hadn't come here].

"I would never have had in my vocabulary before here the word grace and humility, and being in the program actually taught me what those words mean."

Twenty-seven-year-old Sarahjane is also dreaming of a better life.

After a childhood of abuse, the former nurse had hit rock bottom.

"I'd stopped working, I'd stopped looking after myself, I lived in fear everyday," she said.

"I stopped eating or I ate a lot – I used food as a way of protecting myself in an emotional way.

"I was in hospital in Goulburn, I'd just had a big overdose and it was at that time where I just needed someone to be there for me and I think I rang [Destiny Haven] everyday, saying 'please take me'."

Sarahjane is 10 months into the program and said it saved her life.

She has lost 20 kilograms since arriving at the Clarence Town property and was this week attempting to become re-registered as a nurse.

"I wouldn't have had a future, plain and simple [without Destiny Haven]," Sarahjane said.

"I wouldn't have been [alive] because I thought I was alone, that nobody loved me.

"I had a history of child abuse and because of events that have happened, it led me to believe that I wasn't loved.

"It got to the point where I needed help and these guys accepted me in and showed me unconditional love, showed me that I can have a future in God and that I'm someone special."

Sarahjane and Kathryn are just two of the 100 women who have experienced the hope and healing offered by Destiny Haven.

Aged from 18 to in their 50s, the women have battled a range of different "life-controlling" issues, from drug and alcohol abuse to eating disorders, self-harm and depression.

The success of the program comes down to the fact that Janine and Lewis have walked that same path of darkness themselves, before emerging into the light.

Janine was a talented singer and songwriter with a record contract when she descended into a world of illicit substances – as an addict who spent \$1000 a day on heroin and as a dealer on the street of Kings Cross who sold drugs to fund her own habit.

Her New Zealand-born husband, Lewis, had a similar background and together they both indulged in the seedier side of life – and battled against it.

The couple eventually succeeded in turning their lives around and came out of their own time in rehabilitation with a dream of helping others.

In 2007 they set up Destiny Haven under the auspices of a Raymond Terrace-based Christian church, which owned the Clarence Town property.

A year after it began, the church withdrew from the program and put the property on the market – giving the Eperes and the residents they were helping six months to vacate.

It was then the slow but steady trickle of support that had been flowing in for Destiny Haven became a flood, with thousands of dollars donated to help them secure a loan and purchase the property themselves.

"That was 2008 and we had nothing, we had no money," Janine said.

"We had this program, this passion, this absolute knowledge that this place needed to be.

"We put out a newsletter saying this is what's happened and that's when the money started to come."

The generosity continued with their inclusion on the reality television program *Secret Millionaire* and since then donors have appeared from all walks of life.

Over time Destiny Haven has established a flourishing cottage industry to help them become self-sufficient, making and selling homemade jams, relishes and sauces, a range of award-winning and decadently delicious handmade chocolates, as well as Christmas puddings and cakes and jewellery.

Janine said she is constantly amazed by the generosity of others – a generosity which will be evident at the charity's major fund-raiser next month, a six-course degustation dinner featuring renowned patissier Adriano Zumbo and his mentor Dean Gibson.

Tickets are \$100 each or \$850 for a table of 10, with 190 already sold.

The aim is to raise \$50,000 from the dinner and associated auctions – money which would be used to fund one of Janine's many dreams for the future.

These include everything from establishing a similar program for men, a house for mothers and their children and an "after-house" for women who have graduated from the program, to constructing a dedicated chocolate-making building and cafe on the property.

