



**Inspirational Stories**  
**From Courageous Women**



# ***GIRLS SHOULDN'T HAVE TO FINISH LAST***

**SOME WOMEN HAVE TOLD RESEARCHERS THAT  
WHEN THERE IS ONLY ONE FIT, THEIR MALE  
PARTNER GOES FIRST AND THEY GO SECOND**

**JUST BECAUSE YOU HAVE SEX WITH SOMEONE  
DOESN'T MEAN IT'S SAFE TO SHARE FITS WITH  
THEM**

**THINK AHEAD SO YOU HAVE ENOUGH NEW,  
STERILE INJECTING EQUIPMENT**

**IF YOU MUST RE-USE A FIT, IT IS BETTER TO  
INJECT WITH YOUR OWN USED FIT THAN GO  
SECOND AFTER SOMEONE ELSE**

**IT'S GREAT TO BE ABLE TO CARE FOR  
LOVED ONES – BUT YOU CAN ONLY  
LOOK AFTER OTHERS IF YOU LOOK  
AFTER YOUR OWN HEALTH FIRST**

## USER'S NEWS 89

# The Women's Edition

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***NUAA would like to show respect and acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation as the traditional owners of the land on which User's News is published. We respectfully acknowledge all Aboriginal nations***

## EDITORIAL

# Praise for Women

This issue of User's News is dedicated to many wonderful and brave women – those who use drugs, like the amazing women who have contributed their stories, and those who support us by providing health services or adding to the evidence base around drug use and treatment. I would like to focus on one such supporter – Dr. Stella Dalton - and thank for her ground-breaking work on our behalf.

Stella Dalton was an exceptionally strong, resourceful and motivated woman who left an incredible legacy when she passed away on 20 August. She devoted nearly 50 years of her Psychiatry career to working with people who use drugs. As early as the 1960s she emphasised human rights for users, believing that we needed health care and social support, not jails and discrimination. She treated us with respect.

In 1969, Stella became Australia's first prescriber of methadone and soon after started Australia's first in-patient opiate detox unit. She promoted methadone treatment as a means of allowing heroin users to "lead a normal life in society, reasonably happy and productive". She was initially denied funding for the program, but when heroin use doubled in 12 months, a legacy of the Viet Nam war, the NSW government gave her seed funding and she opened Wisteria House in Western Sydney in 1970.

It would have been hard for anyone to get the programs going that Stella did for such a despised population. For a woman it must have been nigh-on impossible. She received an Order of Australia for her services to medicine in 2007.

Cleva was one of Stella's patients and talks about the good old, bad old days, how far we've come and what it took to get here (below). All our UN stories undergo "peer" review by our fantastic volunteer team and they told us this story gave them goose-bumps and that "Just knowing there are people like Stella gives me strength and hope."

You will not be surprised to know that I got this kind of reaction to all the women who have told their stories in this edition. I know their experiences will move and inspire you too. No matter what your gender, I hope you enjoy the Women's Edition.

Leah

# Clewa's Story

## Life with Stella

I was Stella's patient since 1969. She was a goddess, the only person who understood us back then. She was one-out, the leader everyone else watched. It was not just that she pioneered drug treatment services in Australia, though that was incredible. It was that she understood detoxing or getting on methadone weren't enough on their own. She organised housing and gave people work and purpose.

Stella really gave us respect. No-one else would give us a glance, but she dedicated her whole life to improving ours. Back then, doctors only treated users on the quiet, it was all very hush hush. But Stella was loud and proud about it, she spoke up for us, with politicians, in the media and so on. She was an actual life saver; she really fought for us, to get methadone up and get the detox program happening.

In other places they pigeon-holed users, they seemed to want to control us and keep us quiet. But Stella wanted us alive and healthy. While most states were doing blockade – in Queensland you went on 230 mg from your first dose – Stella started people on 40 mg then increased them gradually as necessary.

In the beginning, you were only judged suitable for the methadone program if you hung out badly enough after being given a shot of naloxone (Narcan). Stella gave methadone to anyone who asked for it. She even prescribed to a friend of mine who was 16. She broke the law but she saved his life.

She was only allowed to prescribe for 10 people – that was the limit then – so she got many other doctors on board, training them to work with us. She was very charismatic and persuasive.

If she couldn't treat someone, she found a way for them to be treated. I had friends who were bussed up to Queensland to get on a program. In the mid-80s, they stopped funding methadone for a while in NSW, so Stella ordered buses, ac-



acommodation and referrals for dozens of Sydney users to go up to Tweed Heads to get on the program.

Stella took over Wisteria House, an abandoned building that was part of Cumberland Hospital in Parramatta. She spent her own money on repairs and a new kitchen. She made dormitories for detoxing, putting mattresses anywhere she could fit them. Before that, the only detoxes were padded cells where heroin users would be locked in for a week on their own, with no meds or care.

She got her patients involved to motivate us and get us some work experience. She only had to put a sign on the notice board that she wanted people to paint a room, or fix something or whatever, and dozens of people would put their hands up. We just wanted to put back and we would do anything for her. A lot of us worked there every day. I worked in the garden and it was so beautiful that the hospital staff used to come and eat their lunch there.

Stella really knew her patients. She remembered all our names and never forgot a birthday. I got a card every year for 17 years until I went interstate and lost contact. She went to court for 95% of us; she'd tell the judges we were not bad people, we just had social and health issues that should be sorted in different ways from sending us to jail and they listened to her. She even travelled to Malaysia to give life-saving evidence for two of her former patients facing death sentences for heroin trafficking.

She also got family involved. She used to hold BBQs and invite the parents of her patients. This was in the days of the "tough love" model. She got many families back together, including helping me connect with my Mum. Another thing she did – and this was way before HIV and "harm reduction" – was get us using plastic syringes. It was the day of glass syringes and the needles used to get very blunt and burred which caused lots of damage to veins. She used to get 2ml plastic syringes from vets and give them to us. She would say, just use them once and throw them away, and she gave us vein care tips. Stella was way before her time. I can't thank her enough for keeping me and my friends alive, and for changing so many things for people who use drugs. She was amazing.

**IT WOULD HAVE BEEN HARD FOR ANYONE TO GET THE PROGRAMS GOING THAT STELLA DID, FOR SUCH A DESPISED POPULATION. FOR A WOMAN IT MUST HAVE BEEN NIGH-ON IMPOSSIBLE.**

# IF YOU USE AND YOUR RELATIONSHIPS FEEL ABUSIVE, THIS GROUP COULD BE FOR YOU

We women who take drugs can find ourselves in some vulnerable situations. Most of us can easily remember a time where someone has blackmailed us with our drug use – using it to threaten or control us. Others have experiences of being taken advantage of because our boundaries have changed under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Some of us have found ourselves living with domestic violence because of the tensions involved in using relationships or living as a user with a non-user.

NUAA has started the Women's Wellbeing Group to help women who use drugs to avoid some common pitfalls and improve our relationships. In the group, women learn about types of abuse, the cycle of violence, healthy boundaries, communication skills, interpersonal effectiveness and mindfulness.

The groups are "open", meaning that women can join at any time and attend as many or as few meetings as they like. Women are encouraged to come along each week, but aren't required to do so. NUAA is open to working in different ways with anyone who turns up, depending on how much each person wants to commit and participate.

The group is run by an experienced and qualified therapist, and NUAA's peer support worker. Not only are all NUAA peer workers people who use or have used drugs, they are required to have specific lived experience relevant to their role.

To find out more about the group, call NUAA's main office in Sydney on **(02) 8354 7300** (or toll-free **1800 644 412** if you live in the country) and ask to talk to someone about the Women's Wellbeing Group, or email **melaniej@nuaa.org.au** or **sallyc@nuaa.org.au**

If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, call **000** immediately.

If you are or your children are at risk, please call **1800 RESPECT** to assess your risk and make plans to get to safety.

Domestic Violence Line **1800 65 64 63**

Lifeline **13 11 14**

# **FROM VIVIENNE: GIFT TO SELF (BECAUSE I'M WORTH IT)**

To User's News,

I wanted to write and say thank you for remembering me by sending me the User's News magazine.

I have been reading you for so long so it is only natural that I wanted to let you know that last month, on my 60th birthday, I gave up Suboxone after 20 years. Before that it was methadone, heroin, speedballs, pills – all sorts, and of course alcohol, smokes and bongos. I don't even know everything that I've taken.

I am now abstinent. For me, it was like climbing a wall to the sky.

I am shocked with myself. I do feel the anxiety big time. I know why people find it hard. You have to deal with things like boredom and having feelings I've never felt before, which feels strange. I can not believe how different it is sometimes. I get scared and think: "Why am I doing this? I'm old any rate."

***"It was like climbing  
a wall to the sky"***

And I find myself listening to those really nasty voices. But then I tell them sternly to fuck off. And they do. It's great!

I have started to feel good. I was the kind of person who wouldn't walk out the front door unless I was stoned. So I just wanted you to know it doesn't matter the age, whenever you're ready, help will come to you.

Yours sincerely,

Vivienne



Dear Vivienne,

Wow, you're my new hero! I don't know what made the difference for you – in fact I would love to tell that story to User's News readers – but whatever made you decide to focus on your health, I salute you.

Many of us spend a lot of time wishing things were different. But it is all too easy for all of us humans – not just the drug taking variety – to find excuses not to take action. And it's not so easy to take the big breath and just do it. We are often scared of moving in new directions.

So when someone does step up and make those changes – including having the humility to ask for help – it is very inspiring for all of us.

If you do decide to have a tickle sometime in the future, please remember your tolerance will be very low, so make it a small one and don't do it alone. Too many of us overdose after a period of abstinence.

Thanks for allowing NUAA and User's News to be a part of your journey. It really means a lot to us. We are your community and we respect your choices, no matter what they are. Please know that we are here for you. And happy birthday from all of us here at NUAA!

Love,

Leah xx



# Zoe's Story

## Learning To Be Kind To Myself

I grew up in a home where I experienced a lot of abuse and neglect. As I got older drugs helped me to cope with everything. At 25, I ended up in rehab and I really got my life together. I thought I was doing well until my brother died and everything changed. I started using heavily and I got into the first of many domestic violence relationships with a man I will call Toby.

I changed so much in this relationship, it was as though a part of me died. I stopped doing

anything that was important to me. I isolated myself from my friends and all my support. Toby convinced me that everyone in my life was untrustworthy. I came to believe that he was all I had in the world. I gave him so much power.

If we did crime, I'd always take the bigger risk. He controlled all my money, but every bill or financial responsibility was in my name. I remember having to wake up early one morning and sneaking out to go and buy \$15

hair product to try to have some dignity, just to avoid his rage at me spending money on myself.

Single, I was better at managing my money. I could buy drugs and cigarettes and I wouldn't leave myself desperately starving. Toby and I

would be picking up cigarette butts off the ground and eating at food vans.

Toby would hit me and sometimes apologise, shocked at what he had done. Soon after he would deny that it had

even happened and call me crazy. One day he smashed my phone out of my hand, breaking it, just because I was on the phone to a friend who didn't like him.

The verbal and psychological abuse, criticism and having to walk on eggshells was happening daily. He didn't hit me as often because he could just threaten to hit me, and it would have the same effect.

Toby's life story and childhood were tragic, but not more so than mine. I felt more sad-

**“I CHANGED SO MUCH IN THIS RELATIONSHIP, IT WAS AS THOUGH A PART OF ME DIED.”**

ness for him and his story than I did about my own. I'd feel sorry for him and excuse his behavior because of what he'd been through, forgetting to have any compassion for myself. During my relationship with Toby, I had tried to get help. I saw a couple of psychologists; both just focused on my drug use and ignored the abuse I was experiencing. One of them, an older man, was really inappropriate, asking me questions about sex and sex work when I hadn't brought it up. I didn't know or believe in my worth enough to know that I had a choice about who I went to for support and therapy. There are hundreds of therapists and several ways to get help. It's empowering to know I can pick and choose.

When I finally left Toby I had to quickly move from the methadone clinic we both went to every day. I was scared about asking the staff at the clinic for help because I thought they wouldn't believe me. It turned out they were eager to help. They had seen enough in our time at the clinic each day to know I needed to leave Toby.

After leaving him I had a few shorter but still abusive relationships. Not long after the last relationship, I had a very severe drug-induced psychosis, which led me to get help.

I found attending support groups for trauma, for relapse prevention and a women's domestic violence art therapy group helped me a lot. I needed to be around people who wouldn't judge me and who felt the same as I did. I finally felt as though I wasn't alone. It was through talking to them that I found a good therapist. I started to look at my past and how it has impacted me. This has not been an easy journey for me, but I am learning to be my own best friend. I now know what it is like to have real friends, joy, and laughter and to feel safe. I try to remember to have compassion for myself through everything. It's one of the most helpful things I have learned and it's sometimes one of the hardest to remember.

