

Faces of Recovery aim to be faces of hope during awareness week



By Brock Weir

Over seven years ago, Aurora's Michelle Scott was a woman in search of answers.

She had been living with an eating disorder since her teens, but despite counselling programs couldn't find just the right person in the community with whom she could share her struggle.

One day, however, she found Eating Disorders of York Region, now Riverwalk Wellness Centres, online. At the time, they were hosting an information session and Michelle went through the doors not knowing what to expect.

"I heard a lot of people who are in recovery talk about their stories and share their experiences and there was just generally a lot of support," she recalls.

The supportive atmosphere of the meetings inspired Michelle to get in on the action not only to seek support for herself, but as a volunteer.

As Riverwalk prepares to mark Eating Disorders Awareness Week beginning this Sunday, Michelle is preparing to take the next step in her involvement at Riverwalk - joining their board of directors this spring.

Eating Disorders Awareness Week 2014 runs from February 2 through February 9. To raise this awareness throughout the York Region Community, they will bring in experts to hold courses on Emotion Focused Family Therapy, a new program equipping families of those living with eating disorders to provide vital support.

"My hope is to be able to reach out to younger people, and anybody who might be struggling in the active phases of their eating disorder, to impart to them recovery is possible and there is hope," says Ms. Scott. "Feeling like you are going to be stuck forever and that there is no hope is a feeling everyone can relate to."

"Even though it feels like it is impossible to get out of that place when you are there, it is actually possible. I was lucky enough when I was recovering to have role models and people who have gone through the darkest parts of their journey to emerge on the other side stronger and wiser for it. I would like to play that role for other people, because I found it extremely helpful for me when I needed it."

One such person who has shared this struggle, and has indeed come out the other side stronger and wiser is Ingie Mehmet. Ms. Mehmet struggled with anorexia and bulimia but, after embarking on her journey of recovery at the age of 21, began work as an

addiction counsellor and a counsellor in crisis management.

She joins the Riverwalk team as part of the Faces of Recovery program, which will meet twice as part of Eating Disorders Awareness Week, including a session at the Aurora Public Library on February 4. The event provides an opportunity to forge a connection between individuals trying to recover, as well as their friends and family, with someone who is proof positive there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

“Individuals can make a connection with individuals like myself that have gone through this and have been able to recover,” says Ms. Mehmet. “Recovery is an everyday thing, but it is important to feel strong in their recovery. When I was going through this, I felt very isolated and didn't want to get any help and I didn't feel anyone would have understood.

“In my role now, in terms of being a part of Faces of Recovery, I can help others who are going through that situation and struggling with an eating disorder not feel isolated and have an opportunity to talk to me along with others and seek that support. I never had any peer support.”

She is all too aware, however, that recovery cannot be a “one-size-fits-all” plan or a piece of advice. Everyone's struggles are going to be very different, and the same goes for their means of recovery.

“There is never any definite answer as to what you can do to support someone and how recovery will look for different people,” she says. When I was struggling, there weren't a lot of resources out there. My hope is to give hope and support to those who are struggling now and be able to contribute and give them resources.”

Programs won't stop following next week's Awareness drive, says Janice Morgante, Executive Director of Riverwalk. Volunteers and staff with EDOYR are also getting ready for their respective closeups as cameras roll in February for a short film the group plans to submit to the 2014 Multimedia Film Festival of York Region focusing on addictions, eating disorders and substance use, as well as mechanisms people use to cope.

“It will bring to light, in contrast to the darkness, what is the lived experience of so many families,” says Ms. Morgante. “That is a really exciting project. For more information, visit www.edoyr.com.