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Surrey team addicted to changing futures

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A former aircraft engineer has spoken out about how his alcohol addiction threatened to wreck his life.

Steve Saunders, 66, from Pyrford, Woking says that what started as social drinking turned into an all-consuming addiction, which saw both his marriage and career end.

Now he is using his experience to help others and to send out a clear message, that there is always support in Surrey for those with a drug or alcohol addiction.

Steve works with Surrey County Council's Changing Futures programme on their Bridge the Gap scheme which supports people facing a range of issues including alcohol and drug addiction, domestic abuse and mental health challenges.

"*Like most other people I started drinking in my late teens and 20s socially but it was in my 50s when it started to become a big problem*," said Steve, who is a proud father of two grown-up sons.

"*I now know that I have an addictive personality and that affects how I see alcohol, and one drink is never enough. My behaviour changed and I was awful to those around me – it ended up ruining my second marriage and saw me retire from my job as an aircraft engineer aged just 53-years-old.*

"*At my worst I was drinking a bottle of spirits a day, often in secret. You kid yourself that people don't know what's going on, but it was out of control. I kept losing my driving licence and I was lucky not to be in prison. When I left my job I nearly drank myself to death*."

The turning point for Steve was when he decided to be honest with his doctor about his drinking, and he went into rehabilitation.

"*Going through rehabilitation changed everything*," said Steve. "*I decided I wanted to help others who are facing similar problems and so I became involved in Bridge the Gap to offer my insights into the systems that support people and also to run SMART recovery meetings which are both face-to-face and online.*

"*A huge range of people access the service – business owners, housewives and professional people such as doctors and teachers. All of them have one thing in common – they are looking for help, and we make sure they receive it.*"

Until now Bridge the Gap has been run as a pilot scheme by Surrey County Council, funded by the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the National Lottery – but now a fundraising drive is being launched to raise the £1.4 million which will be needed for it to continue supporting vulnerable people in Surrey.

Eleven local charities are backing Bridge the Gap and these are Catalyst, Guildford Action, The Hope Hub, Oakleaf, Richmond Fellowship, Rentstart, Your Sanctuary, North Surrey Domestic Abuse Service, South West Surrey Domestic Abuse Outreach Service, East Surrey Domestic Abuse Services and Surrey Domestic Abuse Partnership.

Steve said: "*As well as helping others I also get something from the SMART meetings because it reminds me to be grateful for where I am. Anyone facing a drug or alcohol problem needs to know that there is help out there, and we will support them in turning their life around*."

Keely Glithero , service manager at Catalyst, said Steve's input into the Bridge the Gap programme is invaluable.

Keely said: "*Steve's rich lived and learned experience in addiction brings a valuable perspective and contribution to how we deliver services. I am truly inspired by his relentless energy for supporting people, and I'm so glad to support and work alongside Steve as a volunteer for Catalyst in the Changing Futures programme*."

A conference is taking place in Surrey later this month when people, like Steve, will use their lived experience to support others, challenge prejudice and empower themselves. The Power of Lived Experience event takes place on Wednesday, January 31 from 10am to 4pm at Dorking Halls. For more information and to reserve your place contact colette.lane@sabp.nhs.uk

Further information:

Changing Futures Bridge the Gap programme **Changing Futures – Bridge the Gap | Healthy Surrey**

Drug and alcohol support in Surrey – **Drugs and alcohol | Healthy Surrey**

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