

## **GETTING IT TOGETHER - TOGETHER**

by Bryan Alleyne, President of the Vancouver Area Network of Drug  
Users

All of my life I have been addicted to most drugs including alcohol but in 1988 I was introduced to the devil itself - rock cocaine. I've shot coke on many occasions but never smoked it in a rock. I tried it and BOOM! I fell in love with it.

I was working at a pretty good job that I could probably have had for life. Also, I was living with a lady and her two young children but, this rock was taking over my life in every way, shape and form. I couldn't deal with the kids, my woman, my relatives or my job.

I phoned my friend five thousand miles away in Vancouver, British Columbia and all I asked him was "Is there any work and cocaine?" He said "yes" to both. The next morning I gave my two week notice, then went home and told my woman that I was leaving.

I arrived in Vancouver and found a job three days later. I also found cocaine and a drug that was new to me - Heroin. For the next five years I worked five days a week and drugged seven.

My life was sinking into a black hole when I heard of a few people who had started a harm reduction organization. I went to a couple of meetings but I thought those folks were nuts. They were saying that if Users get together and ask for things to make our lives more like so-called normal people, then people with power would listen to us and... maybe, just maybe things might change.

Well, here I am four years later, president of this organization. I'm still addicted but working very hard to make a change in conditions for all of us. Most importantly, I think we are helping to save lives.

A user organization such as VANDU provides an opportunity for more social interaction, access to information not always available on the streets and a focus for those who want to become a more active part of the community.

VANDU provides stipends and honorariums so that users can afford to take a few hours away from the demands of just surviving on the streets and do some productive things. We are constantly lobbying for the establishment of real harm reductions programs similar to those available in many European countries. Our Street Program allows us to reach out to users with basic information on Safe User practices, treatment and services options and sometimes just the support that only a peer can offer. We also have an alley patrol that travels those areas most frequented by users to pick up used needles and provide clean rigs and emergency assistance when necessary. We have a hospital outreach program and work on a variety of community committees to encourage a better understanding of the drug problem and some of the more workable options that will improve the quality of life for everyone.

There are some drawbacks to being a member of a user group. Sometimes the stipends which are so necessary if a user is volunteering instead of having to be out hustling on the streets or standing in food lines can reinforce the pattern of drug use. There is a lot of competition for tasks and complaints of favouritism are frequent. It is important to develop strong policies and rules and see that these are applied to everyone. The benefits of a strong user group is that it offers a social aspect that is not available on the streets. The feeling that you are not completely alone and that you can communicate with people who know just where your coming from is comforting.

Most importantly, being part of a strong user group gives the individual a voice that others listen to. Changes in attitudes are happening all the time and while there is always opposition we are coming closer to establishing sensible solutions to drug problems that will help to save lives, save communities and save money.



***Bryan Alleyne is president of the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users. He is also a volunteer at the Vancouver Needle Exchange and a member of the Alcohol and Drug Committee of Community Directions.***

***He can be reached at VANDU (604)683-8595 cell (604)618-6575 Fax (604)683-8586  
Email [vandu@vandu.org](mailto:vandu@vandu.org)***