

Big rung on the ladder leading out of the gutter

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Anyone who thinks they have problems -- and I don't care how big -- should meet Joe Ladouceur.

He was abused from the womb with heroin, lived off drugs and alcohol for decades, survived two gunshot wounds to the head and somehow went on living after a speeding car ran him down, killing his wife and two young children.

Ladouceur lifts his work shirt to reveal dozens of scars over his back, chest and both arms -- the result of ritual sacrifice in the northern Ontario community he once called home.

On a morning when I was fretting over my clunky transmission and getting mud on the cuffs of my new pants, Ladouceur left me humbled and in awe.

"You've got one life and you really should use it well," Ladouceur says.

And he certainly is now -- thanks in large part to supportive friends, counsellors, a caring new wife and family and Azim Virjee, who took on Ladouceur as artisan and carpenter at Renaissance Cabinets Inc.

The small, specialty woodworking business in the Keating Industrial Park manufactures custom pieces for the new home and renovation markets, winning a competitive bid recently to redo the kitchen for Lt.-Gov. Iona Campagnolo.

Ladouceur is being honoured today in a milestone ceremony as the 1,000th employee placement for Triumph Vocational Services Inc., a Victoria-based agency that connects the handicapped and hard-to-employ with B.C. businesses.

For Ladouceur, 42, his new life as a cabinetmaker is a big rung on a long ladder out of the gutter.

"I'm coming from the bottom so everything I can do better in my life is positive. This job is great," says Ladouceur. "When people have faith in you, it makes you stronger."

Ladouceur is making \$12.50 an hour and quite an impact at Renaissance, where he has added his skills as a craftsman in both metal and wood and innovative ideas that helped production -- even brought employees on the shop floor closer together. Triumph earns fees from the provincial government for Ladouceur's placement, but there is no subsidy for Renaissance owner Virjee, a Kenya native who says he couldn't be more pleased with his new employee.

"They say that only 25 per cent of his brain is working, but I say 125 per cent is working," says Virjee. "He's consistent, has a presence of mind and great dexterity with the hands. He's as open as a book. He brings out the best in everyone here."

Ladouceur credits his wife Stacie, whom he met in an addictions recovery program



CREDIT: Darren Stone, Times Colonist
Assistant cabinet maker Joe Ladouceur uses a multi-drill machine with Renaissance Cabinets owner Azim Virjee.

several years ago, with helping him to start a new life. They have two children aged 10 and six. Stacie has also helped to ease the horrible memories of his past, including the loss of his first wife and children who died on a roadside after the entire family was mowed down by someone with a grudge against him.

"If it wasn't for Stacie I'd be dead or in a bar or in a hospital right now," says Ladouceur. "It's hard to get over the stuff I went through, but she's always been there to support me in everything I do."

Ladouceur left his home town for the streets of Toronto at age nine, not long after recovering from being shot in the head by his abusive father. It was the last straw after years of being carved up in brutal rituals.

He fell heavily into drugs and alcohol. He fought on the streets. In 1993, he again suffered a near-fatal gunshot wound to the head, but saw a glimmer of hope on the road to recovery in a Toronto hospital through the actions of a young girl who was dying of cancer.

"She was the daughter of the doctor who was treating me," recalls Ladouceur. "I was messed up and had to re-learn everything. I was scared to talk to her, but she said, 'That's OK I'll do the talking.' She said she only had a few months to live and she wanted to help someone. For a long time, I never looked in mirrors, but she said I looked fine.

"You can learn more from kids than adults. They never hide or mask anything."

Ladouceur, who says he has been clean of drugs, alcohol and most recently tobacco, still has some problems relating to his brain injuries, but "I work through them."

He also draws strength from his metal art, parishioners at the Colwood Pentecostal Church and from his own talks to local street kids.

"I try to set an example, to tell them they have choices in their lives -- good ones and bad ones."

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