

# A miracle of hard work and a thousand helping hands

**Former 'Cecil' kid leaves the street for 'boring' life**



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It happens that Dawn Hodgins will sometimes forget where she is and slip unconsciously back into her mother tongue.

It is English, to be sure. But her first language, the one learned in childhood from sympathetic dopers and drunks, is highly spiced with that most irreverent of terms, the F-word.

"If I don't watch it, it's every second word," says Hodgins, breaking into a pleased-with-herself laugh that belies those sorrowful years spent in servitude to the streets.

Hodgins, 32, sits across from me in an office at NorQuest College, where in 1993 she began to turn her life around. Her nails are shiny-perfect; her hair in a buoyant bob. Rings

adorn fingers and lipstick stains the rim of her coffee cup.

Out of her comes a story of personal tragedy, despair and miraculous, self-directed redemption. It challenges our well-worn political beliefs about social welfare, while at the same time reminding us that, well, good news still happens in this world.

Hodgins boasts nowadays of living a boring life. Boring is code for married with children, regular work, a clear head and quiet nights at home.

But she also does volunteer work, talking to street addicts and prostitutes. Her paying gig is project co-ordinator for Edmonton Safe Streets and its needle-disposal program, designed to reduce the number of used syringes littering the streets.

Hodgins shakes her head at a recent report of two youngsters playfully poking each other with a discarded needle.

She lost the innocence of her own childhood soon after turning six. Neglected by a divorced and depressed mother, she hung around the downtown drug dealers and prostitutes.

"To them, I was the Cecil kid," said Hodgins, referring to the Cecil Hotel, where Hodgins



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**Dawn Hodgins, who was once intimate with street life, is now a project coordinator for Edmonton Safe Streets and its needle-disposal program.**

relapses.

How did she do it? How did she give up drugs and prostitution more than 10 years ago to become, as the cliché says, a "contributing member of society?"

Her answers will disappoint the so-called social engineers, as well as their detractors.

Hodgins did the hard work herself. She took personal responsibility for her lot in life. But a thousand people also helped her along the way—other recovering addicts, teachers at NorQuest College, AADAC counsellors, friends, family, social-service agencies.

own troubles. "But at some point, people have to help themselves, too."

Hodgins jokes that she was once the best-informed "ho" on Edmonton streets. She always read the newspaper. She always had a sense that life could be better.

She always had this image in her head of a normal family. Nowadays, Hodgins shares that normal, boring image with those still living on the street.

"I really, really, really wanted a normal life," she says.

She wanted it so bad, in fact, that she got it.