

Wilderness centre for addicted youth launched



Heather Hay (right), director of addiction services for Vancouver Coastal Health, hugs recovered addict Lauren Gill after she told of her recovery. JASON PAYNE — THE PROVINCE

Making a dream come true

Health Minister George Abbott yesterday thanked the non-governmental community agencies that helped the dream of opening B.C.'s first long-term residential treatment centre for drug-addicted youth to come true:

■ Central City Foundation bought the 23-hectare site 10 kilometres from Keremeos — the former Outward Bound School — and donated it to the project as a gift. They are also running a fundraising campaign to

renovate and refit the existing buildings.

■ The Portage Program for Drug Dependencies will supply its successful treatment regimen and operate the new centre. It has been treating young people since 1973 and operates similar programs in Ontario, Quebec and Atlantic Canada.

■ From Grief to Action, a support and advocacy group created by parents of drug addicts, was a driving force in getting the program off the ground.

BY ANDY IVENS
STAFF REPORTER

In her darkest hour, drug-addicted Lauren Gill contemplated an end to her miserable life, unable to see a future without her chemical crutch and the petty crimes she committed to survive.

"I was like a bird with no wings," she told a packed press conference in a youth drop-in centre on Vancouver's Downtown Eastside yesterday.

"My life was a mess. I had absolutely no direction what-

soever. I was worn out and I was ready to give up," she recalled. She was 16 years old at the time.

The fresh-faced teen detailed her escape from addiction, minutes after Health Minister George Abbott announced that B.C.'s first long-term residential treatment centre for drug-addicted youth is expected to open its doors next summer.

"I'd been through 10 different drug-and-alcohol facilities," said Gill. "It wasn't a pretty sight."

She finally attended a drug

program in Montreal called Portage and kicked her habit.

The key to getting off drugs for good, she says now, is to spend six months to a year in rehab.

Abbott announced the provincial government is contributing \$2.4 million annually to cover the operating costs of a 42-bed facility in the wilderness near Keremeos called The Crossing.

Addicts aged 14 to 24 must make a commitment to kick their habits, after withdrawing from drugs and alcohol, to


qualify for the program. They must dedicate six months to a year of their lives.

Gill, now 18, works with young drug addicts and jail inmates. "I don't ever want to go back to drug rehab again," she said.

B.C. spends \$1 billion per year on mental health and addiction services, said Abbott.

Of the 1,038 treatment beds for all B.C. addicts, 158 are detox and short-stay placements exclusively for young people.

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