

Drugs, faith and music

BY JAMIE FIRST

Former drug addict and truant Evan Morgan has turned his life around.

As a 15-year-old, he was skipping school and lacking ambition and inspiration. Suffering from depression, Evan was on a downward spiral that continued for several years.

He didn't know how to break the vicious cycle that seemed to envelop his every waking moment. Life was a blur for him and for his mates, whom he introduced to drugs.

Move ahead 12 years and that callow youth is now a confident young man in dreadlocks sipping organic coffee on the steps of Collins Street Baptist Church, talking about saving the homeless.

Evan works with not-for-profit, community-based organisation Urban Seed, where he runs a youth program to educate schoolchildren about drugs and those living rough. There, he also helps addicts and feeds the destitute.

Growing up on the border of Essendon and Moonee Ponds, "in a crappy house on the good street", as he puts it, Evan thought he was destined to "dig holes" for a living.

He has tried his hand at many and varied pursuits – factory work, gardening, busking, bartending, even assisting in residential care – but for a long time he didn't know where he belonged or what he really wanted to do.

The self-confessed "dag" says he had no desire to "get a good job or look right" and often thought to himself, "what's the point of trying".

This malaise lasted for three years after which, out of desperation, he turned to God and hasn't looked back since.

Evan came to realise that his "friends" were "potheads" and was sick of trying to act "cool" around them by doing drugs. He freely admits that he was lonely and missed the simpler times he'd had when he was younger.

Then, out of the blue, Evan received an invitation in the mail to attend a Church social.

While it came from someone he barely knew, on a whim he decided to attend, something he now regards as the best decision of his life.

He says it was his faith that provided him with the "healing" that he craved and just like that, his depression was gone.

He attended "Bible school", where he learnt about issues of justice and principle, for two years. While there, he heard about and became interested in Urban Seed and what it stood for, namely equality, inclusion and hospitality.

Evan lived in the heart of Melbourne in a Church-owned apartment building in the alleyway behind his place of worship, where he "cleaned up" after heroin addicts had had their fix.

He says the "most confronting" experience he had was the first time he witnessed "what went on in our streets".

"The first people I ever saw who were injecting were actually wearing business suits. There were two men and two women, clearly not your stereotypical junkies. They were drug users hidden in society."

Urban Seed does not condemn drug users. Rather, it tries to educate them and provide a safe place for those who can't kick the habit.

Housemate and work colleague Samara Pitt says Evan is "good value". Admiring him for his passion and motivation to help others, she speaks of their friendship as a "gift" for her.

"I really like the work that he does. He takes a lot of pride in it. I have real respect for him," she says.

Evan comes across as humble and self-effacing. He sports a smile and has a glint in his eyes whenever he talks about his job.

He considers it an "honour" when someone who is "wounded" opens up and speaks with him about their past.



PICTURE: JAMIE FIRST

Evan thrives when working with youth.

"Hearing their stories and watching them take their first steps is what makes me truly happy," he says.

He tells a story about how he used to play cricket with the homeless.

One day his cricket boots were stolen and he was forced to borrow a pair of shoes given to Urban Seed.

As he was taking off his steel-capped boots to change into the shoes he'd borrowed, he noticed they, too, had disappeared.

As he looked around, he saw that one of the homeless men had spotted the footwear and switched his "completely degraded, rundown, shocking shoes" for the new ones.

So, Evan simply put on the homeless man's pair and went about his business on the cricket pitch.

He describes the experience as "very humbling and grounding" as he literally had to walk in the shoes of another human being.

The job carries with it only the basic wage, but he says that doesn't bother him. "I just commit to living with a little less or to finding a second job to survive."

Along with his work at Urban Seed, Evan's other great love is music. He always thought dance music was fun and a good way to connect with people – to feel that sense of belonging that seemed to abandon him in his teen years.

Music isn't just a hobby for him. He studied music performance at Victoria University and now composes for theatre, film, dance and animation and plays music in clubs and at festivals.

Evan's biggest regret is smoking marijuana and doing the occasional party drugs because of the impact they had on his life and that of his friends.

He is deeply remorseful about getting his mates into drugs because a number of them are still addicted.

The man who once saw drugs as "no big deal", now acknowledges their social impact and says "it is a selfish, wasteful habit."