

IVO: FRENCH NATIONAL RESIDENT IN BELGIUM

I am Ivo, born in 1965, I live in Belgium but I have the French nationality. This is my life story.

My mother loved to have children, but she couldn't raise them properly. She had 13 children, the juvenile court decided to send seven of us to different juvenile institutions because of our problematic upbringing.

I stayed in this institution until I was 15. I was a difficult child (problems at school, fighting...). After a while, the institution gave me the choice of going back to home or going to another institution. I chose the first option but it turned out to be a bad decision. Although my mother (and stepdad) promised I could finish school, they sent me to an abattoir to work there. I stayed there for two weeks. My mother was not happy with my decision to quit work. My mother hit me and I ran away. The police caught me, said they would bring me home, but I did not want to go home. I was sent to the juvenile court and there they decided to send me to a youth care organization in Antwerp.

I stayed there from 1979 until 1984. Meanwhile I worked in a Chinese restaurant. In 1984, I ran away with an English friend from the youth care organization. We had some friends from other institutions and they gave us hints to earn money fast: car thefts but also gay bashing, stealing from gays, gay prostitution, especially older gay people. I needed money to survive: with my savings (from the job in the restaurant) and money from illegal activities, I rented a room in Antwerp. I preferred a legal income, but sometimes only an illegal income proved possible.

In 1984 I met a man, also gay, who wanted to take care of me. He had his own business (pub, party room and sandwich bar). I worked there for four years. I still lived in the room I rented in 1984. But that man bought a bigger apartment and he suggested that I move into this apartment - for free. In the meantime, I met some new people (from nightlife) who offered me a new job: catering services.

In 1988 I was reunited with my English friend (from the second institution) and we decided to go to Cannes. We had the intention to stay there for a longer period so we decided to look for a job. We found jobs as bartenders but my job was in Cannes and his in Saint Tropez. So we were separated from each other. I became homesick and after four or five months I decided to return to Belgium (Antwerp).

In Antwerp however, I had to start from scratch. I lived with a friend and there I met people who used drugs (cocaine and cannabis). This was the first time I personally came in touch with drugs. In that period I wasn't a frequent user, I used cannabis from time to time. I did not have a job, so I resumed my prostitution activities.

In 1988-1991, working as a prostitute, I met an older man. A rich man. He owned a big business and he opted to start a pub in the prostitution quarter of Antwerp. He trusted me and gave me money to start up this business. Suddenly I had a large amount of money; I did not invest this money in the new business but instead I bought furniture for my apartment. I frequently visited coffee shops to buy cannabis. Someone told the older man that I used cannabis so he decided to stop the sexual and professional relationship with me. I kept the money.

In 1991 I met another person. He was a Dutchman and had his own chip shop. He was a lot younger than me. I still lived in my apartment but started a relationship with this man. After some weeks I decided move in with him. We were together for four years. We travelled a lot, it was a good relationship.

After the break up, in 1995, I rediscovered cocaine. I did it once, but it lasted until 2004 (free-basing cocaine). I also committed crimes: again gay bashing, but also thefts, fraud, dealing. I committed those crimes especially to finance my drug use. The police caught me several times. As a consequence I had a lot of detention sentences: in total I served more than seven months of detention. It was a very harsh period, especially mentally. I became a criminal because I had no other option. I was a good person in comparison to other people (I did not use violence when committing thefts). Between 1995 and 2004, I also started a relationship with a problematic heroin user. I especially used cocaine, but due to him I also

started using heroin. I used it – at first - as a tranquilizer for cocaine, but I became dependent on heroin which caused a lot of problems (health-, but also work- and housing related). I lost everything due to my heroin use.

In 2004 I decided to go to the Free Clinic, a treatment centre in Antwerp. I started substitution and psychosocial treatment. They helped me with administrative tasks (social allowance) and I regained perspective. I started voluntary work. My friend's dependence was getting worse, he committed more crimes and he ended up in prison. As a consequence I had no contact with him anymore, I was lonesome and I started thinking: about my situation, my life and my future. In 2007 I had fully recovered.

I wanted to recover earlier, but my friend did not want to recover I saw a lot of terrible things during my drug and criminal life. Especially the last years, when I was a problematic drug user. I was homeless, I lost everything. Because they offered me a perspective (allowance but especially the voluntary work) I progressed and I recovered. Later, there was a vacancy as "hands-on" expert in Free-Clinic. That period I had recovered for some months from methadone and drugs. They hired me and I still work as counselor and hands-on expert for Free Clinic.

My life goes well. You need chances, but you also need to take them to abandon your criminal lifestyle. You need support from people who believe in you, care-workers, but also non-drug using friends. Sometimes I still smoke cannabis, in the evening, after my job. But I will never become a problematic user anymore. I don't want to and I will never get tempted to commit any more crimes.

I am responsible for my past but my parents also carry responsibility because if I would have had a better youth, I would not have ended up in that situation. However, I do not regret my past. I learned from it and I try to share this knowledge as a counselor. Even problematic users need a chance to reintegration. Some will never recover, but they need the option for a better quality of life.