

Escaping obsessions - Program offers hope to city anorexics

By **SHELLY DECKER, EDMONTON SUN**

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"I'm grateful to be anorexic."

Dr. Joan Johnston repeats the words to make sure there's no confusion about her most-unusual proclamation.

"It's brought happiness, joy and freedom to my life."

That ironic statement is echoed by another survivor.

"I totally agree with her. I have a much fuller life because of it. Being anorexic gives you a better perspective," said Joelle Fawcett-Arsenault, 25, who recently received a 2005 YWCA Tribute to Women of Distinction Award in the community service category.

She was recognized for her role as founder and volunteer president of Edmonton's Society for Assisted Co-operative Recovery from Eating Disorders (SACRED).

Johnston, 56, serves as medical adviser of the society and knows such services are desperately needed.

Now a mom of three teenage sons who's been in recovery for more than 22 years, Johnston became consumed with her body image at age 19 while in medical school. At one point the five-foot-three woman's weight dropped to a skeletal 78 pounds and she couldn't even climb stairs. She was hospitalized, which saved her life, but it didn't stop the disorder.

Finally, Johnston realized her situation was desperate.

"I contemplated suicide, but I just couldn't do it," she said. "It's that moment of truth known to every addict who's hit bottom. We either have to die or we have to ask for help."

She chose life. That was in 1983. And she recovered.

A decade later, Johnston and two others co-founded a 12-step fellowship program for people with eating disorders, based on her recovery. Similar to Alcoholics Anonymous, it's used at SACRED and has spread to several nations.

When it first opened its non-profit doors in 1998 after two years of fundraising, SACRED was a residential treatment centre, but financial woes forced it to close its doors for a few years. It reopened again in January 2003 as a day service.

It sees a high success rate among patients.

"Two-thirds of people who complete the program remain free of their obsessions and are able to feed themselves and don't relapse," says Johnston.

Rates of occurrence are difficult to find, but one study suggested eight per cent of Canadian women have some form of eating disorder. According to 2001 figures, more than half of those with eating disorders drop out of treatment before completion and a third who recover will relapse.

"It's near epidemic levels. I see it in so many people," said Fawcett-Arsenault. "I see it more and more everywhere."

SACRED is significantly different from traditional treatment programs, says Johnston. In hospital, patients often get a menu choice, which allows them to retain a focus on food, and are monitored to ensure they don't vomit.

SACRED operates 12 hours, seven days a week. Patients eat a predetermined menu and aren't watched to see if they vomit.

Fawcett-Arsenault knows SACRED works since she was one of its first patients.

Feeling that she didn't fit in, at age 15 the Consort-area farm girl found happiness in running. She would run 24 km a day and some days eat as little as a peach. She dropped to 80 pounds, an emaciated wreck on her five-foot-eight frame.

She spent six months in an Edmonton hospital, but exercised between 15 minute bed checks. It wasn't until months after her release that she was ready to heal.

"I was in so much emotional pain I probably would have killed myself," recalled the woman, who is now able to run and exercise without overdoing it.

She surrendered and had Johnston as her doctor to help her.

Surrendering to a "higher power" is a very distinctive and key element to the success of SACRED and its 12-step program.

"In order to be sober, I need to surrender all control of my food, my body weight, my shape, my exercise to my higher power," said Johnston.

Today, neither woman knows how much she weighs. Neither desires to learn the figure, a sign of their recovery.

SACRED can treat up to five patients at one time.

The facility's monthly fee of \$1,200 to cover costs is less than a one-day hospital stay. After a four- to six-month stay, most patients leave destitute, since they've often left jobs to seek help. Men are welcome, but none has attended.

The facility operates on a \$160,000 budget, most of which is raised through fundraising.

Treatment options for those with eating disorders in Edmonton is "pitifully inadequate," declared Johnston, citing few hospital beds and overworked psychiatrists.

That's why facilities such as SACRED, which is constantly facing financial struggles, are vital.

Now married, Fawcett-Arsenault is taking a break from the group she helped start. She resigned from SACRED's board last month. She had volunteered at least 40 hours a month.

"I'm going to take care of myself. I'm going to slow down," said Fawcett-Arsenault, who works for Volunteer Alberta.

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- SACRED: Call 423-5508 or visit www.sacredeatingdisorders.com

- ANOREXICS AND BULEMICS ANONYMOUS: Call 443-6077 or visit www.anorexicsandbulemicsaba.com

- EATING DISORDERS EDUCATION ORGANIZATION (EDEO): Call 944-2864 or visit www.edeo.org