

Ciao Bella: Finding a safe haven from addiction



CAMH provided a safe place away from Paul's street-drug addiction. A little dog named Bella turned his life around.

Paul arrived at the CAMH Queen Street site about three years ago, looking to break the cycle of his morphine use. The 56-year-old Toronto resident remembers arriving at CAMH's Queen Street site. "I told the receptionist I needed some help and just wanted to be straight."

Before CAMH, Paul had worked hard and played hard for years. He worked long hours to make good money as a commercial/residential mover. He partied too much in his spare time, using mostly cocaine and alcohol.

He was also using prescription painkillers such as Percodan "just to get through my work day." That evolved to morphine purchased on the street.

"I needed around \$700 a week for drugs so I was into theft and dealing to get the money," Paul said. "Every day you are hustling." He also acquired hepatitis C from his street drug use.

When he arrived at CAMH, Paul received treatment and a range of supports through CAMH's Addiction Medicine Services to help get him back on track:

- **Addressing basic needs:** Paul had some basic needs such as sheets and towels when he moved into a new flat closer to CAMH and away, deliberately, from his drug-using acquaintances. CAMH Case Worker Anita Persaud helped to provide a few necessities for his room, and also connected Paul with an opportunity to volunteer at a weekly breakfast club for CAMH clients. Paul has volunteered there ever since – serving up omelettes, bacon, sausage, toast, cereal and fruit to fellow clients every Tuesday. "It helps keep me straight – it's like a safe haven around here," said Paul. "Anita has been really helpful, also with forms for my disability and transit pass, things like that."
- **Methadone treatment.** CAMH physician Dr. Kay Shen coordinated Paul's maintenance treatment on methadone. Prescription drugs such as methadone and buprenorphine/naloxone play a key role to treat people who use illegal opioids such as heroin, or become addicted to prescription opioids such as fentanyl and hydromorphone. For example, methadone can prevent withdrawal symptoms, is given orally to avoid health harms from needle use, and is provided in a controlled dose. Paul picks up his dose at a nearby pharmacy and sees his CAMH physician once a month for consultation.
- **New friends:** And the CAMH First Impressions team members made him feel at home. "I first met Paul to ask if I could speak to him about CAMH's tobacco-free policy," recalled CAMH Community Ambassador Ann McDowell. Paul didn't want to hear too much about the CAMH policy at that time. But at a barbeque for addictions clients, Ann approached him again. "I sat down with Paul so I could get to know him as a person, and so that he could know me as a person too." Since then, Paul has got to know all of the CAMH Ambassadors during his daily trips to the Queen Street site.

Then, about a year ago, Paul found Bella.

Bella is a Havanese, a Bichon dog breed originally popular in Cuba. She is also a tiny white bundle of energy.



"Now I've got someone to take care of."

Bella's former owner, a woman Paul had met at a community program in Toronto, was homeless and looking for someone to mind her dog for a few days. "She knew me because she used to ask me for cigarettes." Paul agreed to help out, and a few days turned into a lifelong commitment to Bella.

"She's my dog now. I got her fixed, she's had her shots at the vet."

"It's a 24/7 job because she is pretty high energy," Paul said. "But I love her. Now I've got someone to take care of."

Paul takes Bella every day for a walk through the CAMH site. "People want to stop and pet her and ask me her name. She thinks she owns CAMH now. She's great with people but I don't take her to the dog park because she's not so good with other dogs." Paul has also been known to spoil Bella with a special filet mignon kibble, and with the occasional trip to the groomer. "She gets the haircut, the nails, the works."

"Paul has made us a part of his day," said CAMH First Impressions Supervisor Bharati Singh. "We help him with his recovery, and he's also playing a positive role for our clients. They can interact with Bella and it makes them so happy. We also see Paul interacting much more with CAMH staff, guests and clients, now that he has Bella."

In addition to Bella's unofficial role as top dog at CAMH, Bharati and Paul are exploring whether Bella might take part in pet therapy programs for clients.



Walk this way: Paul takes Bella for a walk with some friends from CAMH's First Impressions Team

What's ahead for Paul? He likes the stability of his new life, the safety of his routine at home and at CAMH, and his little canine companion. He has stayed in touch with his sister after his parents passed away.

"I am respecting money now," said Paul. "I'll treat myself to a breakfast, and spend some money on Bella these days, and not have to chase money for drugs." Paul is still concerned about his hepatitis C, although doctors say his health is okay.

He's focusing on the here and now. "I choose not to use drugs. I go day by day and I don't want to screw up."

"I haven't used in more than three years."