



**United Way**  
**Central & Northern**  
**Vancouver Island**

## **Nanaimo resident celebrates 18 months sober after a decade of addiction**

National Addictions Awareness Week was in November and Wendy Dennis, a 25-year-old Nanaimo resident, has reason to celebrate. Thanks to a United Way funded program, she has been sober 18 months.

Some people fall into an addiction, but others like Dennis, are born into it. Growing up surrounded by alcohol, Dennis started drinking at 10 years old. By age 16, she was using drugs with her caregiver.

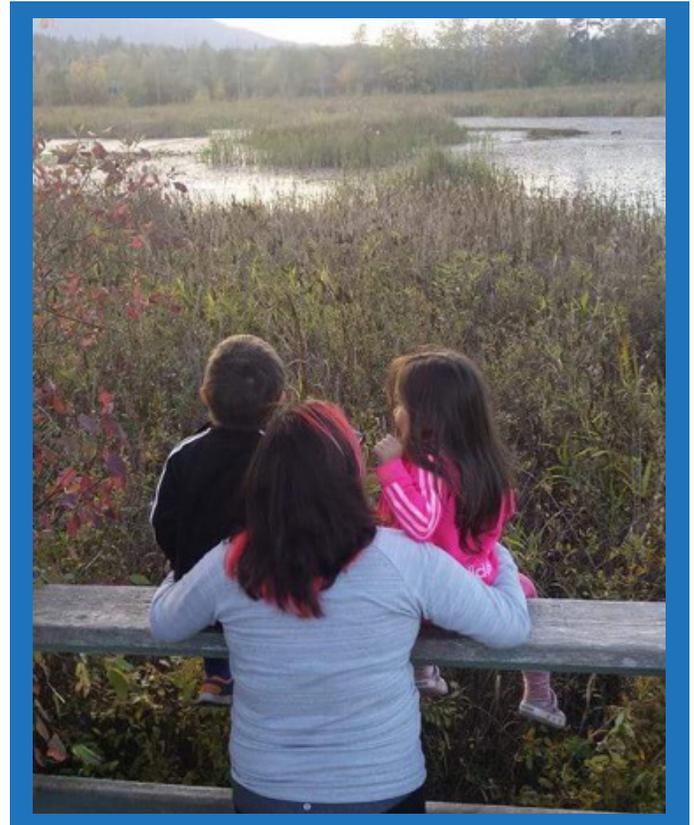
Until a year and a half ago, addiction controlled Dennis' life. High school was tough, and she was suicidal. She drank every day and eventually dropped out. At age 16, she got into an abusive relationship with an older man and started using heavy drugs. Most kids at age 16 are worried about getting their driver's license, but for Wendy, it was where she would find the money for her next high.

The next eight years were a constant struggle of moving around with no stable home or job. She was using drugs during her pregnancy and her son was born with severe jaundice, but came home from the hospital healthy. Too intoxicated to understand her son was sick and screaming in pain, Dennis realized she needed help. She turned to the Haven Society but left shortly after because she couldn't stay sober.

"It was such a challenge, and I didn't have the strength or support to overcome my addiction," recalls Dennis.

Her life took a turn for the worse when the Ministry of Children and Family Development apprehended her two children while they were waiting for the bus. Dennis watched helplessly as her children were taken away, and spent the rest of the day crying. "It was heartbreaking," recalls Dennis.

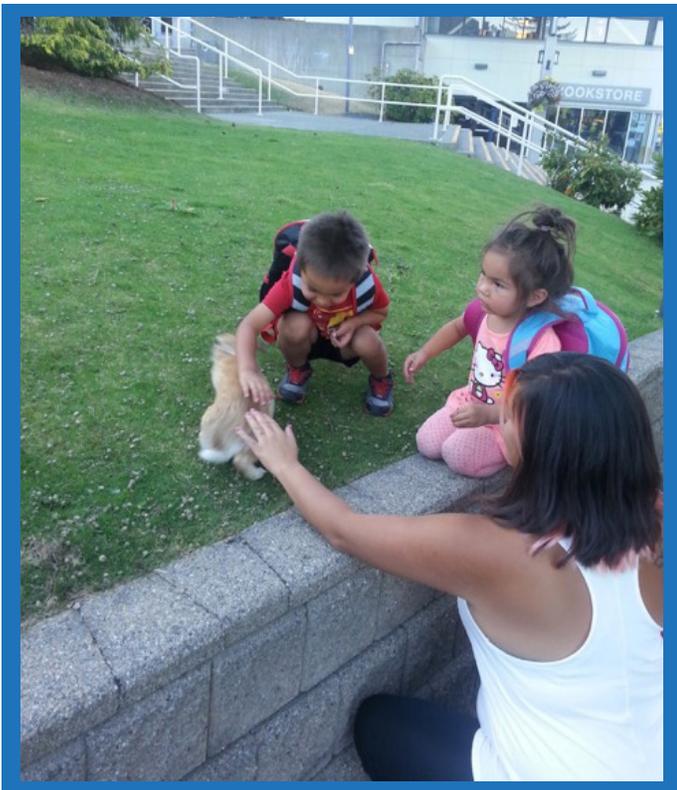
Dennis applied to go for treatment, but left after six days. She was coming down off drugs and once



again, the pain overcame her strength. She eventually stopped using drugs and started drinking every day. "I was allowed visiting rights to my kids but I stopped going because I didn't want them to see me drunk. I started calling them instead."

Finally, Dennis joined the Tsow Tun Le Lum Treatment Centre program again and moved into the Tillicum Lelum Aboriginal Friendship Centre's Young Mothers transition house, a program that receives funding from United Way Central and Northern Vancouver Island and other funders. She also started going to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings regularly.

After 13 months with a stable place to live and support through the Young Mother's transition house, Dennis moved into her own place, just a few weeks after she



got her kids back from foster care. With the help of her social worker and a strong support network, she enrolled her children into daycare so she could continue taking classes at Vancouver Island University (VIU). Wendy is now in her second year in the First Nations Aboriginal University Bridging Program Certificate, gaining credits for a bachelor degree in child youth care.

“I want to work with young mothers and teens. I know it’s an emotional job, but I feel like I can really connect with them,” said Dennis.

Dennis is grateful to be living on her own and attending VIU. Going to school has always been her dream. It is a challenge to manage homework while raising two children, but she is determined to succeed. She surrounds herself with a supportive network of people.

A favourite activity of the cheerful student is biking around Buttertubs Marsh Park with her kids. Dennis recognizes the need to stay active to stay sober. She wants to give her two kids the best life possible.

Wendy Dennis is a motivated mother, determined to make a great life for her and her two kids. She has experienced some tough situations, which has helped make her a stronger person today.

According to the Canadian Centre of Substance Abuse, youth between the age of 15 to 24 have the highest self-reported past-year use of illicit substances compared to older Canadians, and are five times more likely to report harm because of drug use. The Government of Canada’s Homelessness Partnering Strategy provided funding for the Young Mothers program through the United Way Central and Northern Vancouver Island.

Donations to your local United Way help fund programs that tackle social issues such as addictions, mental health and homelessness.

The Young Mother’s program provides transitional housing to new and expectant young mothers and their children who are homeless or at risk of homelessness in the Nanaimo region.

To read more stories about how your donations have helped, visit [uwcncvi.ca](http://uwcncvi.ca).