

HIGH ON CHRISTMAS

Young mother kicks chaos of heroin for her son

Sixth in a six-part series



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VANCOUVER SUN

L

ike any new mother, 25-year-old Christy Cobban loves to bounce her six-month-old son, Jaedyn on her knee. He laughs, giggles and plays with his toes, and she is entranced. No matter the conversation or who's in the room, there's always a

piece of her that's fixed on him.

On her living room floor are wrapped Christmas presents for Cobban's large family — presents she's been buying all year because as someone living on social assistance, she can't afford a spending spree. But her family has been good to her and Jaedyn, she says, and she wants to be good to them. Particularly this Christmas — Jaedyn's first, her first in their new home, and only the second when she hasn't been shooting, or thinking about shooting, heroin.

On first meeting, it's a stunning realization. You wouldn't guess to look at Cobban that she could have had such a past. She is pretty, vibrant, personable and well-spoken — in no way your typical heroin addict.

There are two reasons for this. The first, says her case worker, Pam Fairfield, an outreach worker for the Portland Hotel Society, is that there's no such creature as your typical heroin addict.

"They come in all shapes, sizes and ages," she says. "We have all kinds of clients whom you'd never know were addicts."

The second is that Cobban, who is now taking particular care of herself, Jaedyn and the two-bedroom subsidized apartment they share on Vancouver's east side, hasn't had to suffer the many indignities of living on the street.

Thanks to the continuing support of her parents, Gordon and his wife, Helen, and Laura Clayton and her husband, Brian, friends and various institutions, she has always had a roof over her head. Even when she was stealing, lying and shooting up every day.

But that, she insists, was then. Now she is clean and free, and she intends to stay that way. She says this with almost matter-of-fact modesty, as if everyone climbed this kind of Everest every day.

"I know I have to do it to be a better person," she says. "I don't want to live my life in chaos any more. I don't long for that chaos any more."

Fairfield is also as certain as she can be that Cobban will succeed. "There are some women who make it," she says. "We've seen it happen for sure. But it's rare."

"Christy is one of the best mothers I've ever seen. She has flourished as a mother, and she's flourished as a person."

And she's determined to demonstrate that this Christmas by providing Jaedyn with a big family celebration — the first of what she hopes will be many.

It wasn't always so.

Cobban did her first drugs as a teenager. She went to rave parties and did them recreationally. But it was no big deal, she says. They didn't have any lasting effect.

It wasn't until she was 21 and met a boyfriend she declines to name — an addict himself — that she got into trouble.

"He told me if you use it one time, it's not addictive," Cobban says. So at first, she was careful not to use it more than once a week.

The strange thing is that she never liked it. Yes, she did get high the first few times, but it always made her sick, and the thought that she might get addicted scared her.

Yet she continued to do it — and at her own insistence, not her boyfriend's. She finds this hard to explain — to identify exactly what it was that made her want to continue — but she is careful throughout this interview not to blame anyone for what happened to her. It was entirely her own doing, she says.

Fairfield says this may be one reason why she's been so successful getting clean. "To own



GLENN BAGLO/VANCOUVER SUN

Christy Cobban, 25, wants to provide her six-month-old son Jaedyn with a big family Christmas celebration.

HEARTFELT tales



Christmas is a time of hope, giving and celebration. The Vancouver Sun has put together six life-affirming stories for the season that illustrate these themes.

■ **Monday, Dec. 18:** A sick child is looking forward to a lively Christmas.

■ **Tuesday, Dec. 19:** A supportive place for dying animals during their last days.

■ **Wednesday, Dec. 20:** Christmas remains a vital religious festival for churches.

■ **Thursday, Dec. 21:** The winter solstice means different things to different faiths.

■ **Friday, Dec. 22:** Students and teachers are brightening their communities.

■ **TODAY: A special mother and child celebrate Christmas in Vancouver.**

what you've done is really important," Fairfield says, "and she has. She says this is her responsibility and no one else's."

Before her addiction, Cobban had been pregnant and had suffered a miscarriage, and that was a blow. But again, she's at a loss to say precisely how, or if the miscarriage was a trigger for the addiction. All she can say is that afterward and as time wore on, she found herself at an increasingly low ebb.

"I thought I cared about life, but I didn't," she says, trying to explain. "I came to a point where I didn't care what happened. I wanted

there to be chaos."

"Chaos" is a word that comes up often in talking to Cobban. It is as close as she can get to explaining the appeal of her addiction. Because strange as it sounds, on that chaotic level, there was something appealing about it.

"I wanted chaos in my life. Even though it's horrible, you long for chaos. A lot of addicts are like that."

Certainly her life was chaotic. She lost her job; her father, with whom she was living at the time, threw her out when he discovered she was using and stealing from

him; and when she made it into detox, officials threw her out of that when they learned her boyfriend was supplying her with drugs on the sly.

"That happens all the time too," says Fairfield.

From there, she began a three-year cycle of using, unsuccessful attempts at rehabilitation — a sick-making ordeal that left her nauseated, sore and ricocheting between feelings of intense heat and cold — and more stealing (including taking morphine from her mother, who suffers from multiple sclerosis). It wasn't until she became pregnant with Jaedyn that things began to change.

Not immediately, but slowly and purposefully, and eventually enough for Cobban to declare herself free of heroin on a day she'll never forget: Nov. 15, 2005.

And it's true, she hasn't had another hit since.

Now Jaedyn's father, Jessie Lambert, is a regular part of the family too.

Fairfield says Cobban is one of her luckiest clients in that her family never forsook her, the way families of most addicts do.

That, she believes, made the crucial difference between rescuing Cobban and watching her descend into the kind of dead-end existence many addicts endure.

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