

Window on a Weird World.

Residents view motel as a crazy place to live. Nothing is as it seems.



She watches from her window, like it's television. Look - there's one of the young guys who runs drugs for the big dealers, a group that started showing up at the motel about a year ago. And that room over there, that was where Carla Slots was living with her boyfriend Bobby. He went to jail just before she was murdered.

The guy upstairs tells me what I'd see if I watched out his window for long enough. Buyers would be passing by with thumbs up or down - up for cocaine, down for heroin. Suddenly I know what the girl had meant the night before when she asked if I was looking for up. The guy says it drives him and his friend crazy, the door-knocking all night long from people looking for drugs.

A whole lot of unimaginable things have gone on here - overdoses, arrests, stabbings, miracles. The Holiday Court Motel is where people turn up when their addictions are running the show, and weird things happen all the time.

Heroin, cocaine and alcohol are the drugs of choice at the Hillside Avenue motel, the "triumvirate," as one police officer calls it. Most of the residents are addicted to one or another and occasional users of them all.

Some are skinny and sick with HIV and hepatitis C. Some have mental-health problems. Some are just out of luck, and this is where they're stuck until something better comes along. They are from all over the region, the Island, the country, not so much picking Victoria as just happening to be here when things started going wrong.

The life stories that led them to Holiday Court vary, but what they have in common is a lot of pain and a powerful need for drugs. They find them here. They get high to get high and then high to stop from feeling bad from not getting high, and they spend too much of the rest of their time trying to pull together enough money to get high again.

Inside: It's no vacation but there's nowhere else.

Nothing is as it seems in this place: the sweet kid with the placid eyes who looks like a Rastafarian-haired friend of my son's is dying of AIDS; the tough-looking teen in the rugby shirt I'd assumed was one of the dealer's boys is in fact here to help his parents from the mire of their addiction.

And there is friendship and kindness - a cake and a rousing chorus of Happy Birthday to surprise a pal, a pair of popcorn-knit mittens proffered to a chilly working girl, photo memorials of Slots in the tired motel office where the stand of tourist brochures leans forgotten against the window.

There's even something to be said for the daily dramas: at least they keep things lively. "I've been here eight years off and on, mostly on. I think I was the first drug dealer here, not to brag or

anything," says one motel resident. "I've had apartments in that time, but I always come back here. The other places are too boring."

Rooms are \$24 a night, cheap by local motel standards. But this place is no bargain. Whatever pile the stained carpets used to have wore off a long time ago. The smell of past and present cigarette smoke is inescapable. And something's always going wrong, whether it's the taps or the hot water or the heat. Half of the motel's 22 rooms don't even have a place to cook.

But the residents put up with it because there's nowhere else to go, no landlords who'll put up with the fights and the deaths and the late rent.

"I stay because I don't know where to go," says the guy upstairs. "I've seen more than one body down there. People have broken my window more than once. It's a crazy place to live."

He keeps an axe near the door, a hammer across the room and an iron bar near his bed, although he can't recall needing them in the four years he has lived here. Everybody's got something, partly because a person just never knows and partly because the drugs make them paranoid.

Heroin does crazy things to people. They start out with the nod, which looks almost like unconsciousness but isn't. then they get to "tweaking," a kind of restless energy. Cliff Dirksen, the Christian outreach worker with an office at the motel, figures they'd make amazing house cleaners in that phase. One time, a tweaker in the room above him ripped out a hot-water radiator and flood Dirksen out.

Overdosing is always a risk, especially for anyone who has already been drinking. The paramedics carry Narcan, a wonder drug that brings people back from the dead long enough to get them to hospital. But a couple of residents are wondering if people are starting to count on that a little too much.



Clean syringes, no questions asked: Street Outreach worker Rebecca Young holds up a bucketful of needles for motel residents. One couple resells them to desperate addicts for \$2 each.

"One of my friends overdosed so many times I finally said to him, 'What, are you addicted to Narcan?'" recalls one motel regular, so regular that the police who show up to attend to his stab wound later that night beckon his dog over by name.

The cocaine, that's something else entirely. Late in an addiction when the brain chemicals are shot, users can be injecting as often as 20 to 40 times a day for highs of no longer than seven minutes. And while a lot of heroin users can be shifted onto methadone, a less damaging drug substitute taken by mouth, there's nothing comparable for cocaine.

The needles come into Holiday Court by the bucketful from the downtown Street Outreach Service, which is trying to keep a handle on disease by handing out clean syringes, no questions asked. One guy keeps a five-gallon bucket in his room for used needles.

But wouldn't you know, there's always someone who'll take advantage of good intentions. Dirksen knows of a couple at the motel who hoard hundred of free needles from the exchange and then sell them back for

\$2 each to desperate addicts.

Neighbours fed up with petty crime, propositions and the used syringes and condoms outside their doors haven't exactly put out the welcome mat for Holiday Court tenants - the grounds are

surrounded on three sides by a chain link fence topped with three lines of barbed wire to force resident to approach from the front of the hotel, where police can see them.

But there's a hole at the back to sneak through when needed, like on those nights when the parking lot is crawling with cops.

Its no home sweet home, but you do what you can. More than one resident noted last week that at least it has been several months since any children were living in the motel; the fewer young eyes to bear witness, the better.

The people who stay around long enough even do a little decorating, mounting their pictures and their keepsakes just like anyone would. The tourist, well, they mostly don't pull in any more. If they do, somebody usually warns them off.

There's a new guy hanging around tonight, maybe 22 and fresh from a year in prison. He's from Vancouver and looking for his friend, and he knows that this is where to find him. I see him later and he says he never did catch up with the guy; instead he scored some heroin and then ran off when he saw the cops pull up.

The Holiday Court Motel, what a name for this place. There's no vacation here.



A hole at the back of the motel property allows resident to sneak through when needed, like those nights when the parking lot is full of cops..