

Love is All You Need.

Drug Addict bent on suicide finds Jesus and sees his share of miracles at motel.



Tattoos mark tougher times for Cliff Dirksen who has since found his calling: one tough motel. His mission is to improve the lives of its tenants.

The Lord works in mysterious ways, and in Cliff Dirksen's case He chose to melt the hose that Dirksen was using to kill himself.

Dirksen thought he had it all planned out: 40 sleeping pills, a hose to channel exhaust into his van and it would be all over, all the booze and the acid and the fighting and the pain. He was 27 years old, a Langford boy going nowhere. He'd had enough.

So he's sitting there in the fumes thinking to himself, God, if you're real, this is the time to show up. All of a sudden the fumes disappear. Dirksen gets out of the van, peers underneath and sees that the hose has melted and fallen off; he fixes it and starts over.

Same thing happens. Dirksen gets out again to see what's up and there's the hose, melted off again. Only this time, enough of it has melted off that it's too short to fit in the van window any more.

And not just that, but Dirksen's been trying to kill himself for an hour now and he isn't even sleepy, let alone overdosed like he was supposed to be.

He took it as a sign and headed for the hospital to get his stomach pumped. It'd be perfect at this point in the story to report that indeed, Dirksen found God at that moment and changed his life from that day forward. Unfortunately, the truth is that he was back drinking and fighting in less than 24 hours.

The real moment didn't come for another three weeks, when Dirksen was sitting quietly for a moment and suddenly felt the change coming over him.

It's been 13 years since that day and he's never gone back to drinking, an abstinence so long and cultivated that he barely feels the call of those bad old days any more.

Ministry: "Everyone at the motel wants to change. All it took was respecting them."

He's practically cherubic-looking now, but the heavy tattoos up both his arms speak of tougher times.

He'd been clean and sober for a good long while by the time he drove past the Holiday Court Motel, on Hillside Avenue near Douglas Street, one day in the spring of 1998.

"After coming out of that lifestyle, I'd found myself wanting to dedicate my life to helping others pull themselves out and not get caught back up in the life. This place really stood out for me", says Dirksen. "A couple days later, I got a room there."

Over the past few years, the 22-unit Holiday Court had changed from a tired little tourist motel to the home of last resort for people addicted to alcohol, heroin and cocaine. It's a shooting gallery for users throughout the area, and people support their addictions through petty crime, prostitution and trafficking, making the motel one of several epicentres of crime in the city.

No doubt, this is a population in need of hope. Dirksen had found his ministry; he would spend the next two years living at Holiday Court, keeping his preaching to a minimum and focusing instead on treating people like human beings.

"Love never fails. That's my slogan," he says.

He's now living in East Sooke but maintains his Extreme Outreach Society, affiliated with the non-denominational Victoria Harvest Church, at the motel. He's hoping the day comes when there's enough money to let him quit his drywalling job and staff the motel ministry full-time. He sure can't live on what the church can afford to pay him, about \$1,500 over the past two years.

Dirksen has seen his share of miracles at the motel, and who's to argue? A 15-year-old girl seemingly dead from a heroin overdose suddenly vomiting herself back into life; a pitbull attack that could have been fatal had one of the long-time residents not lunged out of his room like a wild man and tackled the dog; an impromptu round of restorative justice involving a crowd of angry teenage boys and the addict who'd taken \$20 from one of them.

But there are ordinary things to take care of in between miracles, like arranging for donated mattresses from Sleep Country to replace the worst of the worst, like weekly barbecues and Christmas stockings and help in finding better places to live.

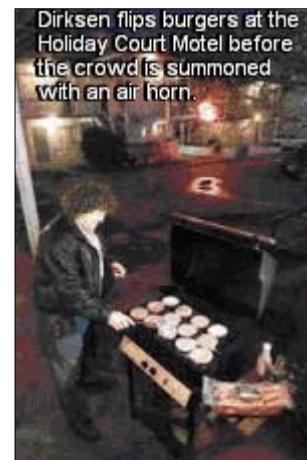
"Everyone at the motel wants to change. And we can count up to 70 people we know of who are making efforts to change their lives since we got involved there, people who no longer live there," says Dirksen. "All it took was just respecting them. It wasn't shoving another program down their throats."

It's a long way up from down, and Dirksen says everybody falls sooner or later. "I always know when it happens because they'll sneak back to the motel and won't want me to see them because of the guilt they're feeling. I always say never mind; just go at it again, another inning."

Living conditions at the Holiday Court have improved from a couple of years ago, says Dirksen; he still remember his reaction to the rats and roaches when he first moved in.

He gets the room for \$400 a month, well below the minimum \$520 that others pay, and management has generally been tolerant of his work, occasionally even enthusiastic.

Now if these latest ones would just pay a little more attention to the basics, like fixing the heat instead of leaving people to bundle up in blankets and coats all winter.



Dirksen flips burgers at the Holiday Court Motel before the crowd is summoned with an air horn.

Dirksen's got the big dream: Somebody steps up and donates \$2 million to his cause, and he buys Holiday Court and turns it into some amazing kind of Christian rehab place like they've got in the Lower Mainland. That'd change some lives.

But for now he'll have to make do with the little stuff, like how the 17-year-old who called him from jail today says he's at least staying away from heroin and coke. And that's how it starts.

"We want to bridge people over into treatment, but they have to make that choice," says Dirksen. "And if they don't make the choice to change, we're still going to be reaching out. Persevere, and you can change people's hearts."