

Lifering just that for those overboard

By VIRGINIA McDONALD
Guelph Tribune

More than 25 years ago, when then Baptist minister Gordon Hill found the courage to tell his Toronto congregation he'd battled alcohol addiction and won, their response renewed his faith in himself.

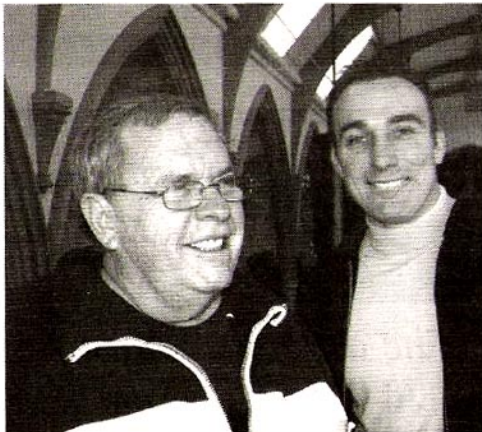
"They were totally positive, totally supportive. There was no loss of trust," recalls Hill. "It was really quite phenomenal."

Hill, a retiree and still recovered, has found that kind of positive support again in a secular self-help group that marked its first year in Guelph on Monday.

The quickly expanding Lifering Secular Recovery invites newcomers who seek help to abstain from alcohol or drug use.

Although new to Guelph, Lifering has had groups throughout North America and other countries, including in treatment centres, for several years and is expanding in Canada.

Group director Jason



Gordon Hill (left) and Jason Kelly stand inside Chalmers United Church, one of the meeting sites for Lifering Secular Recovery, a support group to abstain from alcohol or drugs that marked its first year Monday.

TRIBUNE PHOTO BY VIRGINIA McDONALD

Kelly, a new addiction therapist in Guelph, says Lifering provides an additional resource or an alternative to Alcoholics Anonymous.

"AA is not for everyone."

says Kelly. "It's important to have additional types of support groups available for those who do not find AA to be a good fit."

Kelly adds that this is not

to exclude people who find AA beneficial. Many attend both Lifering and AA meetings.

Hill says he finds Lifering's approach "life affirming," because it "gets away from pathology" and focuses on the here and now.

"People are looking to find positive strengths in life, and solutions they can build on," says Hill, who has worked with the homeless, mentally ill and addicted — "all the marginalized . . . the people that we can put any label we want on," he notes.

Hill says many forms of therapy now encourage people struggling with any issue, such as depression, to look at the times when they weren't depressed and "go with that, and expand that."

People who are addicted, adds Kelly, "have lost who they were. Once they've recovered their original self, it doesn't mean life becomes a dream. But once they recover themselves, know who they are, they can work from there."

Although Hill has stayed

sober, Lifering came at the right time for him. "Last year at this time was pretty horrendous," said Hill, who'd struggled with depression.

Kelly says Lifering's main benefit is its focus on current challenges and the future, and moving beyond shame and guilt, emotions that anchor people in the past.

There are no steps, but members support each other and help each other learn new sobriety techniques. For people who want more structure, Lifering offers the Recovery By Choice workbook.

Group members help each other practise "sobriety priority," meaning, simply, that they don't drink or use drugs no matter what, and share techniques to maintain that. "The simple question of "How was your week," is a powerful tool, says Kelly.

The group has expanded to 50 members and now convenes a third local meeting. It was started 12 months ago by Kelly, a graduate of McMaster University's

addiction program and a concerned Guelph resident who has recovered from alcohol misuse.

There are now demands to establish meetings in three area cities, he said.

Although the group uses the word "secular" in its name, it doesn't discount the benefit of religion or spirituality in recovery, says Kelly. The meetings remain secular to avoid debates around religious issues.

"Our group wishes to respect the variety of faiths expressed in a multicultural society," said Kelly.

Guelph hosts the Lifering 2005 Congress at University of Guelph in the spring, drawing international speakers and top addiction professionals.

Lifering meets at St. George Anglican church Mondays at 8 p.m., and at Chalmers United church Thursdays at 7 p.m. The Recovery By Choice workbook meetings are available by appointment only. Visit www.lifering.com or call Kelly at 836-2411.