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## No longer forgotten: Batavia man offers an empathetic ear to people in trouble

By MALLORY DIEFENBACH  
mdiefenbach@batavianews.com  
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Mike VanSlyke has lived the darker parts of life. He's now working to help others with his effort called the "Forgotten Ones."

BATAVIA — Mike VanSlyke has lived a life making many mistakes.

Many lives, actually — and he said he's made most mistakes there are to make.

So he has a unique sense of experience and perspective.

“I’ve been to the top and the very bottom,” VanSlyke said. “Everything I offer comes from a place of experience. I’ve lived it, and I know how to survive it. I know how to find the way back.”

That’s why VanSlyke started a one-man support group called the Forgotten Ones on April 7. He and his efforts were recently featured in DePaul’s online blog.

“I offer support, helping dealing with issues,” he said. “I’m not a therapist but I can be a peer that someone talks through their issues with. That someone can confide in when they need to.”

VanSlyke offers a listening ear and someone people can confide in. If they have a problem or issues on a level requiring professional help, medication or a facility, he will talk with them and help them become more open to that kind of thing.

Even if they are feeling lonely or in a crisis at 3 a.m., Forgotten Ones will be open for someone to reach out and call to.

VanSlyke said the things he offers can only be offered if he’s not a professional therapist because he can get personal and real. And he does it all confidentially — people can open up to him since they know he’s done the same kind of bad stuff as they did and he can tell them how to live with it.

While it’s not the non-profit he wants to be, VanSlyke serves as a support network filling the gaps he can.

That’s where the name Forgotten Ones came from; People who struggle with mental health are left behind. The addicts of today are forgotten.

VanSlyke said his story of falling into addiction came from one of his many talents, in this case often negative: Lying, manipulating and even a little acting.

He said in order to know people, you learn everything about a person and what each little thing means; from the look on their face, the way they hold their hands, if they are tapping their feet, what the look in their eyes means. You can also see if they look away and what is their speech is saying — all of it from head to toe pick ups on what their body is telling you.

VanSlyke said he was a master at this and how to use it for his advantage.

“For the longest time I was able to make psychiatrists and doctors believe anything and get them to prescribe me anything and everything,” he said. “I learned early on that if you play stupid, are easygoing. Let a person believe something was their idea, that it’s the right thing to do and there’s no other options, and that they are helping in some way, then they will do anything, buy anything, and damn near give you anything you want,” he said.

VanSlyke said while he loves people, he’s always been selfish.

“I’ve always made excuses for why I can’t do this or that and for why I always mess things up, or why I did things that I shouldn’t have and pretend to be stupid,” he said.

“The truth is that I usually did things intentionally, even planned them out, some of the things I did even though I knew I’d get caught,” VanSlyke continued. “I just didn’t care and I figured that whomever I was hurting, stealing from, or just doing dirty would forgive me in the end. Sometimes I didn’t even care if I was forgiven. That whatever it was I gained was worth more to me than the person was.”

VanSlyke said he was always ready for the next hustle or to fulfill the next impulse, as long as there was instant gratification when it was over. Inner peace and silence was the enemy, and when there was no impending doom approaching or a life-altering decision to make, or some relationship to fix, then it was unbearably uncomfortable.

“If there was no problem hanging over my head I would go and make a problem, a big problem,” he said. “It’s funny to sit here and think that the reason I smoked that first bowl of weed was for peace in my mind and to forget the problems I had at 10. To be fair, most 10-year-olds weren’t dealing with those kinds of problems. In the end though the problem comes from the smoking of those bowls.”

Looking back, VanSlyke said he’s so appalled by his past behavior.

He said there are so many different reasons why people take drugs: Perhaps nobody took the time to talk to them about what drugs do to their life, maybe they think they’ll be cool, they feel alone or aren’t happy. Some might have mental health issues or problems nobody knows about so they’ll do anything to feel OK.

VanSlyke said it doesn’t make sense and even the person smoking looking back won’t understand how it happened — how a bowl of weed turned into a needle full of heroin.

Nobody grows up though and decides they'll be addicted to drugs.

“(Nobody) decides that they're going to hurt everyone they know and steal everything they can,” Van Slyke said. “(That) they're going to make sure that they have a felony record and no job history so that when they do decide to get clean, if they survive the addiction, that they'll have the most difficult time possible trying to get a regular job.

“So that when they finally do something about that feeling and think of ‘I don't want to get high anymore. But damn I have to, I can't be sick.’” he continued. “They have nobody to support them, no ability to get a job, don't even know a person that doesn't get high, so there's nobody to talk to, they hate themselves. They hate life, don't know that there's a whole different life out there. They have to do the hardest thing they've ever done and do it all alone. Not only that, with everyone they love waiting for them to fail, and say, ‘I told you so,’ and just turn their backs again. Because nobody really knows addiction unless they are an addict.”

VanSlyke has become sober since moving into Batavia Apartment Treatment Program last August after using for 29 years. So he's now making the effort to be a person who listens, is reachable, and has been there — a person who knows exactly the dark places from which people are emerging.

He said Forgotten Ones wouldn't have started if he hadn't kept getting help. Of he had given up or if Lisa Glow, a program director at Horizon Health Services, had given up on him.

If he didn't find DePaul's Batavia Apartment Treatment Program where he can live with a counselor on site 24 hours a day.

VanSlyke said he wants to take everyone's pain away and show them that happiness is possible. They don't need to live in their own hell or be their own devil.

To reach out to the Forgotten Ones, visit the Facebook page at [1stForgottenOne](#), call (585) 993-4403 or e-mail [1stforgottenone@gmail.com](mailto:1stforgottenone@gmail.com).

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mdiefenbach