

SPOTLIGHT: SWORN MEMBER

Climbing Up From Rock Bottom

Constable Jeff Elvish, Thunder Bay Police Service
& Uniform Director, Thunder Bay Police Association

By Lauren Alpern

In January 2018, Constable Jeff Elvish of the Thunder Bay Police Service literally had a gun to his head. He was at rock bottom and thought the solution to all of his problems was ending his life. He brought his faithful dog with him to the cemetery where his parents were buried and was going to first shoot his dog and then end his own life. But the puppy dog eyes looking back at him made him question what he was doing, so he picked up the phone and texted his now fiancée, Laura Cheetham, for help.

He knew her because she worked in a retail store he frequented and her father was the President of the Thunder Bay Therapeutic Riding Association.

"I had a friend who is really struggling with PTSD, and I had gotten her phone number to see if I could get help for him," said Jeff. "But that day in January, the light-bulb went off and something compelled me to reach out to her. She was able to talk me through it and bring me back down to a point where she was able to help me. We weren't even dating at that point."



Jeff and his fiancée, Laura, are getting married in August.

It wasn't an easy feat for Laura, however. Jeff sent the initial text, but then blocked Laura's number, so she wasn't able to reach him again. She borrowed a friend's phone to get through to him.

"I knew I had to get there—I had to find him," said Laura, who said it took her an hour and a half to find him after his first text came in. "Getting to know him over

those first few months, I knew he was like a scared child in a man's body. He was lost and didn't have anybody. I just had to find him."

She refuses to take any credit for saving his life, however.

"At the end of the day, it was his choice to make the call," said Laura. "I could have said the right things, I could have said the wrong

things, but it was his choice to make the call."

But putting the gun down was just the first step. By March 2018, Jeff's drinking was out of control, he was moved out of the Criminal Investigations Unit because of it, and he was starting to feel like he was no longer one of the guys his colleagues wanted to see coming in the door behind them.

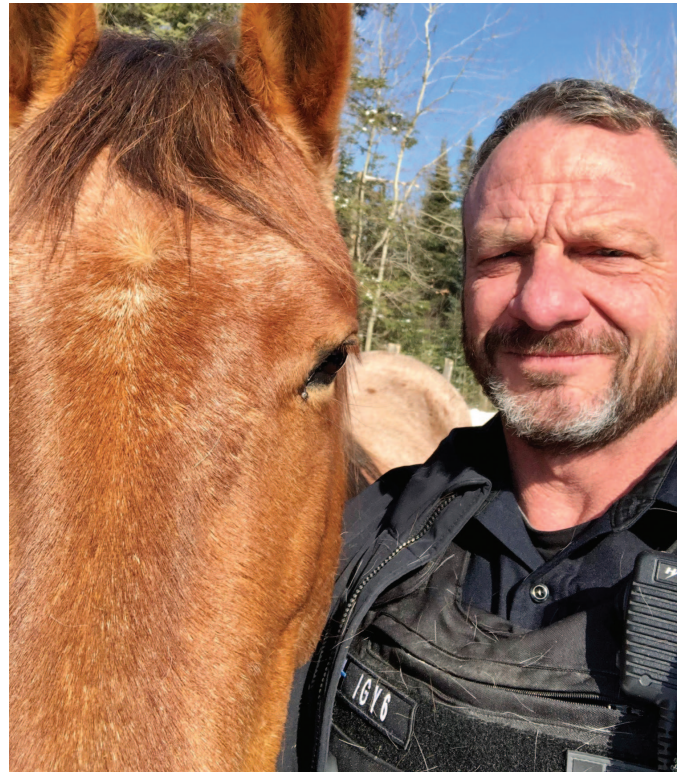


Jeff in his happy place: proposing to Laura; with his daughters and granddaughter; and getting some equine therapy.

“Work was becoming more stressful, and drinking, unfortunately, is the miracle solution to a lot of things because, for a few hours, it blocks out everything in your mind,” said Jeff, who has been sober since March 15, 2018. “If I had a bad day at work, I needed a drink. If I had a good day at work, I deserved a drink. If I had a day off, why not have a drink?”

As things came crashing down, Jeff was apprehended and spent two months in the adult mental health program at Home-wood in Guelph, Ont. It was there that he was diagnosed with PTSD, stemming from losing his father when he was 11 years old. He had never received counselling and a lot of that grief and trauma was kept bottled up inside.

Now, having chosen to go into a career where trauma and PTSD are rampant, Jeff realizes how important it is to not only get counselling, but to also be open about the difficulties you’re



having. In fact, one of the first things he did after getting released from Homewood was to go speak to his colleagues at work about it. Many went up to shake his hand after he opened up to them.

Given all that he has been through, the advice and knowledge he can offer to his colleagues is invaluable.

"We're all born with a backpack, and as we go through life and we're wandering on our journey, things get added to our backpack," said Jeff. "They could be pebbles, they could be boulders, and if we don't empty them, the backpack gets too heavy and overflows. That's what happened to me. My backpack just overflowed."

Jeff has many tips now on how to make sure that the backpack doesn't overflow.

"I would do this all over again, but I would learn the coping techniques early on in my career, like leave your job at work. When you hang up your uniform, leave it there. It's too easy to get wrapped up in the police work 24/7. Our police careers are a way to make a living, it's not a way to live," said Jeff. "Go talk to a counsellor. Find someone you're compatible with and go talk to them regularly, even if it's about good things. You go talk to them in five to 10 years and they will be able to see when something's up. We need to be able to talk about things. Also, our peers are our best support group, so talk to them."

For Jeff, sharing his story has really made a big difference. He wanted to make sure that he turned his negative experience into a positive.

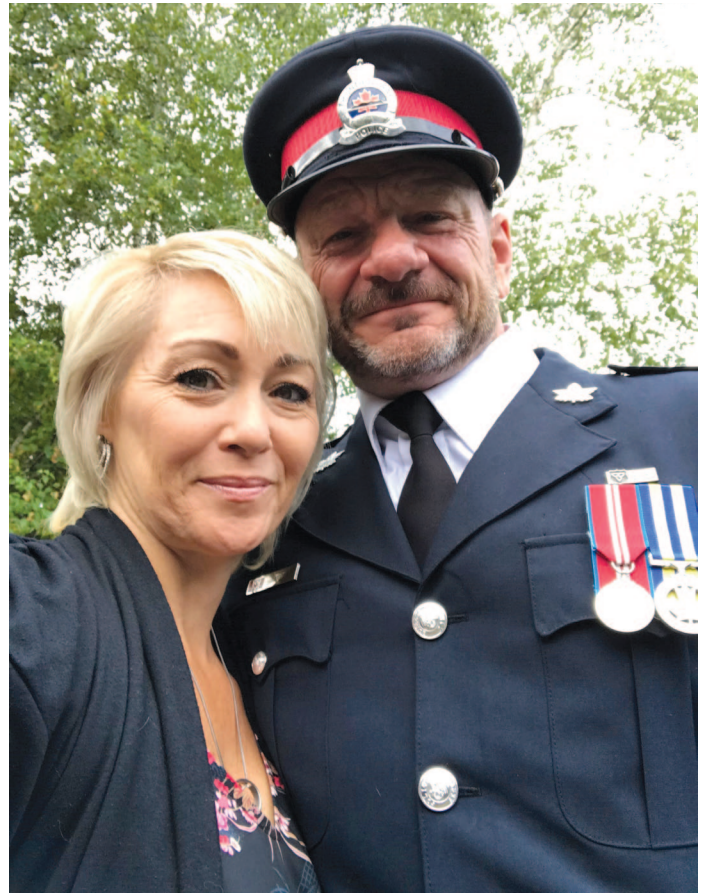
"When I was in Homewood, I thought to myself that I had to do something with the negative experience in my life so that it wasn't a waste. I had to tell people that it's okay," said Jeff, who became a grandfather earlier this year. "You confront the problem and you deal with it. I was back on the road at full capacity in six months. The important thing is to get from that bad place to a better place."

Jeff is grateful for the support of his daughters, Jordan and Justice, who never gave up on him even when he was at his worst. That support helped him get to a better place, despite the fact that his daughters live in the US, so his time with them and his granddaughter is limited.

In the meantime, Jeff and Laura are planning their August wedding, and are busy with their business, Blue Tarten Stables, a facility where those struggling with mental health can go for equine therapy. They currently have seven clients, six of whom are first responders. It is their happy place, and Jeff, in particular, is able to find peace and calm with their horses, bird feeders and home gym.

He's not out of the woods in terms of dark days, but with Laura at his side, the support of his daughters and colleagues, and Blue Tarten Stables well under way, his backpack is emptied on a daily basis.

If you need support or want to talk, there are many resources available to you. For one, Jeff is always available to listen without judgment. His cell number is 807-631-6236.



Jeff took this selfie before he checked into Homewood so he could remember where he was.