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Taking it 'one day at a time'

THE CITY: 'I've struggled more than some . . . but a lot (of people) are a lot worse off than me,' young man says

By IAN GILLESPIE, THE LONDON FREE PRESS

Last Updated: June 25, 2010 7:29am



Mark LeBlanc, 21, received this year's Youth Star Award from Youth Opportunities Unlimited for overcoming significant barriers and demonstrating perseverance, commitment and responsibility. He has quit using drugs and alcohol, is working to get his life on track and hopes to go to college next year. (CRAIG GLOVER, The London Free Press)

As he painstakingly recounts the litany of group homes, detention centres and bad choices that have darkened his life so far, Mark Leblanc clenches and unclenches his hands.

Clench and release. Clench and release.

Even here, sitting in a lounge chair with an untouched cup of green tea in front of him, it's as if Leblanc is engaged in a pitched battle with some interior force that threatens to leap out and run amok.

But now, for the first time in his life, Leblanc knows he has a chance to run toward something positive.

"All these doors are opening for me, and it's up to me to put both feet in the door," he says. "Lot of times, I've been a one-foot-in-the-door, one-foot-out-the-door kind of guy.

"I feel privileged to be in the position I'm in."

On Thursday, the local social agency Youth Opportunities Unlimited (YOU) presented Leblanc with its annual Youth Star Award, which recognizes a local young person who has overcome significant barriers and demonstrated perseverance, commitment and responsibility.

When the Kingston-born Leblanc first arrived at YOU's Youth Action Centre about five years ago, he was homeless, out of school, struggling with a fractured family and battling an addiction to a variety of substances, including crystal methamphetamine, which he says he started snorting and smoking at age 16.

But with the help of some local groups — including YOU, London Cares, Narcotics Anonymous and Street Connection — Leblanc has earned his high school diploma from the G.A. Wheable Centre for Adult Education, completed more than 120 hours of community service and hopes to enroll at Fanshawe College next year.

But this quiet-spoken young man knows his battles are far from over. And as a reminder of that reality, he has programmed his Smartphone with the initials O.D.A.A.T. — One Day At A Time.

“Been there, done that, don’t want to go back,” says Leblanc, adding he hasn’t done hard drugs for nearly three years. “I’m just trying to stick with it now. I’m still struggling with it.”

The difference this time, he says, is a big dose of self-honesty.

“Out there (in the past) I put on this persona, these masks,” he says. “I was faking. I was posing, all the time. Always trying to one-up someone. I wasn’t me. I was never honest with myself.

“It was always everyone else’s fault,” he says. “You know, why do these things happen to me? I just never looked at it as, well, maybe you’ve got work to do on yourself.”

So far, it’s working.

“Mark never lets a situation defeat him,” says YOU employment counselor Eva Sovenyhazi. “When he faces a barrier, he regroupes and refocuses. He sets realistic, attainable goals.”

Leblanc admits he still stumbles. But when he does, he repeats another of his personal mantras: “Wake up, wake up, wake up.”

“I’ve struggled more than some . . . but a lot (of people) are a lot worse off than me,” he says. “Where I am, the position I’m in now — I’m very fortunate.”

Ian Gillespie is a Free Press city columnist.