

As the Christchurch City Mission raises money for a new \$10.5 million building, CHARLIE GATES spends a week finding out how the mission helps some of the city's most disadvantaged people.

Providing a haven for women

Lisa (not her real name) smiles and looks around the garden. "This place is my sanity," she says.

The smile tells much about how this garden has helped Lisa come to terms with the trauma in her life.

The small garden sits behind an unremarkable pair of buildings in Hereford St in central Christchurch, but within the buildings some of the most troubled, disadvantaged and marginalised women in Christchurch can seek help.

Lisa was repeatedly raped by her brother in her teenage years, and another man raped her when she was 15. She suffered serious brain damage in a car accident in 1972, has struggled with drug addiction, has overdosed twice and has attempted suicide.

But she still smiles. She has attended the Walsh House drop-in centre, run by the Christchurch City Mission, for about a year. It has helped her confront the trauma created by being raped.

"I never told anyone I was raped and it screwed my head up. When I first came here I had a lot of hang-ups," she says.

"If I hadn't come here, I don't know where I would be now. I'm a billion per cent different. Within the last year, I can't believe how different I am."

Lisa is one of many women who have found help and solace in the two Hereford St buildings. Wahine Whai Ora in one house holds group counselling sessions for women trying to kick drugs and alcohol, while the Walsh House drop-in centre is a haven for troubled women.

Walsh House offers education, life-skills classes, access to other services, medical help and budget advice for women.

Ruby (not her real name) has also found comfort at the drop-in centre. She has struggled since



Support service: Catherine Williamson is supervisor of Walsh House, which offers education, life-skills classes, medical help and budget advice for women.

Photo: STACY SQUIRES



STRONG DEMAND

- Walsh House last year had 1692 clients, of whom 271 were new arrivals.
- Walsh programmes include parenting, dance, self-esteem and budgeting.
- The number of people seen by Walsh House rose 77 per cent last year.
- Wahine Whai Ora currently helps about 124 women.
- 750 women have attended group sessions over the past four months.

thought never in my life would I go to a place like that. I went along and I was surprised."

Next door, Wahine Whai Ora offers group-support sessions for women addicted to

alcohol and drugs.

Jenny (not her real name) had a "major drug problem" but has been clean since going to the mission.

"When you are at home you don't have the support, and other people don't understand what you are going through. They totally understand what you are going through here. I am 108 days clean, and a huge part of that has been the support here," she says.

"The main thing has been having people relate to me. I have been able to talk to people about what is going on and they have not judged.

"I have learnt to deal with the obsession of wanting to use but knowing I have chosen not to. I feel pretty good because I have regained relationships with my

family that I had lost. I have a life now."

The support Wahine Whai Ora offers was tested last September when one of the women who used the service, Rebecca Chamberlain, was found dead under a semi-detached house in Wainoni.

Chamberlain had been going to group sessions at Wahine Whai Ora for about two years before she was murdered by her husband, Jason Somerville.

Case manager Heather Robinson said group sessions were suspended for a week to allow the women to talk about their grief.

One woman who regularly attends sessions says it was a hard week.

"It was a really intense week. Rebecca was great. She was quiet

but funny at the same time. She just giggled," Robinson says.

"She didn't say much. She knew what she was talking about, though. There are still some Fridays where I expect her to walk through the door."

The mission chapel held a service for Chamberlain so people who knew her there could say their own goodbyes, Robinson says.

"We were able put on a service for her, which I thought was good. The chapel was full. It was really good to do that and get closure."

■ Tomorrow: the Great Opportunity Shop.

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