

“The 388 saved me”

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The 388 made a real difference in the lives of the people I met. (Caroline Grégoire/Le Soleil)

COLUMN / “A psychiatrist told me about the 388, but I didn’t believe him, I had preconceived ideas about psychoanalysis. But they saw my potential.”

This is 388, rue Saint-Vallier.

When Mireille* arrived there in 1993, she was a shadow of herself, stuffed with medication to neutralize her. "Before I arrived there, I had been under the care of the CHUL for 2 years. They gave me anything and everything, lithium, anxiolytics. At 388, they believed in me. I did a master's degree, a doctorate. I'm doing great."

Today, she teaches.

The 388 is, from the perspective of the mental health system in Quebec, a bug in the system. But it is a bug that has been working for 42 years for many schizophrenic or psychotic people, who are treated with psychoanalysis. But the 388 is only that. At the 388 there is also an approach through art, through personalized support, and through a team of professionals. It is place that you can call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

It is also a residence where people can go when they are in crisis, when they lose touch with reality.

I am telling you about it, it is because it is supposed to close on March 13.

I had the privilege of talking with six people who frequent the 388, including Monique*, who arrived there seven months ago, after turning in circles in the system for too long. "They tell us that after the closure, we will have the same services elsewhere. I know what these services are. They are not bad, but they have nothing to do with the 388. Here, all the resources are together. In seven months, we have already touched on all the causes of my psychosis." She has identified the things that trigger her.

A bomb disposal expert

And we agree that this is what we want. We want someone who has had a psychosis or who has been diagnosed with schizophrenia to reach a point where they feel things coming, where they can defuse the crises before losing control. 388 is a bomb disposal expert. "It's a prevention and healing center."

Flora* bounced from depression to depression since the age of 11. She experienced the psychiatric hospital, the "grab-tie-poke." The what? "It's when they put you on the ground to give you an injection. And then, you wake up in a room, tied up, with very little clothing. People can't imagine what it's like..."

She came out of it traumatized.

That was about ten years ago, before she set foot in the 388. After starting at the 388 she was quickly able to resume her studies at university, and complete her baccalaureate. She now works in her field, has even become a peer helper. "When I had a second psychosis, I was able to come to the residence here, I was able to keep my housing. When you come here, your life doesn't fall apart. There are also the art workshops, the drawing, that helped me."

Judith* also experienced the trauma of a psychiatric hospital before coming arriving, about ten years ago, in the cocoon of 388. "Here, I knew right away that we were getting to the bottom of

things. It's a more global approach. There are also artistic activities, ceramics on Tuesdays helped me a lot."

Thanks to the 388, she works, she is stable.

She also discovered a talent for painting, with her own colour code where colours are linked to values. She brought a portfolio to our meeting, along with notebooks containing notes left by people who had seen her exhibitions. She also brought a collection of poems that included some of her poems, alexandrines.

She is radiant.

Lucien*, for his part, needs the safety net that 388 offers him.

"When a crisis comes, when there is a situation where I feel vulnerable, I can call here. It's an element of security, it's essential to feel surrounded. When you're alone, there's fear, there's sadness."

— Lucien, patient at the 388

The 388 is his lifeline. "Here, it's so accessible when you need it. It could be for a day, it could be coming to participate in an activity to be with others. We're taught how to manage what's not going well, we're given the means to find solutions."

People become responsible for their lives.

The same goes for Jacques who, before knocking on the door of 388, spent half the year in the hospital. "They gave me a rocking chair, that was my therapy!" His life was going nowhere, he could never keep a place to live, much less a job. "I was disorganized. I was disconnected from reality. I was losing everything."

For almost two years, he has had a home, and a job that he loves. "Now, it's my turn to pay my taxes, and I'm not sorry to pay them! My whole life was the hospital. There were so many attempts to cure me that didn't work. Here, I've rebuilt my foundations, I'm building on solid ground. There's not much that scares me, the house of cards can't collapse anymore."

The fiscal argument

The CIUSSS brought up the fiscal argument for closing the 388. But have they even calculated the savings in hospitalizations? In ambulances? In police officers?

With just the six people around me, I'm pretty sure we wouldn't be far off the mark. Jacques alone cost the state a small fortune, and did not get better. Now he contributes. But it is more than that, it goes well beyond a matter of numbers.

These people are doing well.

I did a little exercise with the six users, I asked them to describe the 388 to me in a few words, then to do the same thing for their experience in the system. First, the 388: community, family,

welcome, respect, listening, oasis, openness, harmony, trust, support, fulfillment, self-awareness, freedom.

Then, their experience in the system: anonymity, isolation, overmedication, depersonalization, trauma, coldness, confrontation, rigidity.

And it is the 388 that we want to close?

* Fictitious first names

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