

Raphaëlle's redemption: From homeless teen to law student

BY ANDREW DUFFY, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN DECEMBER 30, 2012



Raphaëlle Ferland, 23, is a third-year law student who was homeless at the age of 15. She spent two years on the street, then went to adult high school, college and now law school.

Photograph by: Bruno Schlumberger, Ottawa Citizen

OTTAWA — Seven or eight years ago, you might have noticed Raphaëlle Ferland panhandling in downtown Ottawa: she had a shaved head, men's clothing and a drug problem.

Beneath that lurid mask, however, was a young woman of flint and steel and extraordinary potential.

Indeed, with strength of will and timely support, Ferland has lifted herself from homelessness to a privileged place in academe. She is today a third-year law student at the University of Ottawa with two jobs, a driver's licence and a grade-point average of six.

"Life is still pretty hard, but I'm moving forward," says the 23-year-old as she sips a caramel latte and considers her uncommon journey.

It is a redemption story that speaks both to the power of resilience — and the magic of a helping hand.

Raphaëlle Ferland was born in Montreal. Her parents divorced before she was two and she went to live with her father, who frequently moved jobs and cities. They lived in the Philippines, Mississauga

and Winnipeg.

When she was 11, Ferland moved with her family to Gatineau. And although they would stay in the area — her father had by then remarried — their home life would be marked by conflict.

“It wasn’t a pleasant environment,” says Ferland, who was first asked to leave the house when she was 12 after a row with her father and stepmother. She stayed with her mother and returned after a few weeks, but the precedent had been set: she would be told to leave whenever there was trouble.

Her school life was not much easier since Ferland was always trying to fit into a new environment. She attended six different high schools.

“I’d always be the new girl at school. Anytime I’d make friends, we’d move,” she says.

At 15, Ferland experienced life on the street for the first time. Both she and her brother were ordered to leave after returning home one Sunday night at 11 p.m. Their father deemed it unacceptable even though he hadn’t before imposed many hard and fast rules.

It was two weeks before Christmas 2004. The siblings went to Rideau Street since they knew it was home to an all-night McDonald’s and a posse of young people. Ferland took sick and ended up in hospital.

After that, she bounced between her mother’s house, her boyfriend’s place, a youth shelter and her father’s home. In April 2005, her spiral accelerated. Ferland was handed a three-day suspension from school for smoking pot, but rather than face her father’s wrath, she left home.

“I knew we were going to fight, so I just left,” she remembers. “That was the first time I was completely on the streets.”

It was the week of her 16th birthday. Ferland spent the next two years weathering the hurly-burly of homelessness. She took drugs to numb the pain and blur her reality.

“I didn’t want to remember anything or really to live a life,” she says.

Between hours of panhandling, she’d go to the Youth Services Bureau of Ottawa drop-in centre, where she could eat lunch, take a shower and do laundry. Most evenings, Ferland would buy drugs and meet up with other homeless young people. In summer, they’d sleep in parks or under bridges; on cold nights, they’d cram into protected pockets of concrete between downtown buildings. She’d go to a shelter only when she was ill.

“I’d rather be on the street with someone I knew than be in the shelter with no one I knew,” she explains.

Somehow, Ferland managed to stay tethered to high school. She was often late — she didn’t have an alarm clock — but muddled her way through a French alternative school.

The street has a powerful grip: the combined effects of drugs, poverty, prejudice and weariness have defeated many determined efforts to break its hold.

For Ferland, the turning point in that contest came the day she heard about the YSB's "Downtown Committee," a youth group that would get together to discuss poverty, policing, drug abuse and other issues.

Ferland held strong opinions on the subjects. She stormed out of her first committee meeting, but came back again the following week.

"What got me hooked, honestly, I don't know," she concedes. "I guess I liked doing it and not being treated as a child."

Ferland came to know and trust many people at the youth agency. It meant that when Ferland next faced a crisis in her life — a violent breakup with a boyfriend — she turned to the YSB for help. She met with a counsellor and was eventually given the keys to an affordable apartment, one of 65 operated by the youth agency. (Ferland would stay there for five years, her longest stay in one place.)

"That was the most significant thing in my life: I had someplace I actually felt was home. It meant a lot having someplace to sleep, someplace to always go."

With stability came success. After she graduated from St. Nicholas Adult High School, she sat down with her YSB social worker, Jacques, to decide what to do next. Ferland thought she would try to find a job since college seemed out of reach, not least because of the \$90 application fee.

Jacques, however, convinced her she had the ability and tapped into a community fund to pay for the application.

Ferland was accepted into La Cité Collégiale's social work program. She beat her drug problem by going cold turkey and abandoned cigarettes. "At that point, I wanted something better in my life," she says. "I knew I could do something better."

Ferland excelled in college, graduating second in her class with an A-plus average. She worked for a time but wasn't satisfied, so applied to the schools of social work and law at U of O. Law appealed to her because it promised better pay and concrete results.

"As a lawyer, you can fight for someone's rights and see it through to the end," she says. "In social work, sometimes the change you work toward doesn't come about for years. I like to see the change."

Ferland wants to use her law degree to advance human rights both internationally and locally. Past president of the university chapter of Lawyers Without Borders, she's now trying to establish a charity with which she can advocate on behalf of the homeless.

She intends to use her story to introduce high school students to poverty issues, to help them understand the challenges that homeless young people face in overcoming their circumstances.

"I remember being told, 'Get a job,' when I was on the street," she says. "That's something that frustrated me so much. I wanted to say, 'Give me a job. I'll work.' But who would hire me when I don't have an address to put on a resumé, when I don't have a phone number?"

For those still on the street, she also has a message:

“Even though you’re at the bottom and you can’t see the light at the end of the tunnel, it’s there. Reach for it. Because there’s no point in going backwards: you’ve already been there.”

[Click here to read other homeless youth's stories.](#)

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