



Rene JOHNSTON/TORONTO

Bridget Perrier, 29, recipient of this year's YWCA Toronto Woman of Distinction Turning Point award training to be a community worker after a past that included drugs, prostitution and jail time.

Woman told dying son she'd turn life around

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It's hard for Bridget Perrier to believe she is one of this year's YWCA's Women of Distinction.

She was a troubled young woman who had been given up for adoption by her Ojibwa mother and says she never thought she would amount to anything. She did drugs, was a prostitute and served time in jail.

Today, on International Women's Day, Perrier, 29, is one of seven women to be honoured for contributions to the lives of women — she's receiving the YWCA Toronto Woman of Distinction Turning Point award.

"I think every woman is a woman of distinction," Perrier said. "I'm honoured to have this award. It's a big thing for me, one of the biggest things in my life right now. All my life I considered myself unlucky and now I'm lucky to have this. I'm hoping that other women who are in the position I was in years ago will see I survived and they can do it too ... There is hope, you can turn yourself around."

Perrier, a student in social work at George Brown College

with two young daughters, has big dreams. She plans to work on a master's degree in social work and then one day start a hospice for dying children in Northern Ontario. She also helps native women who have been abused, opening her home in Toronto as a refuge and acting as their advocate.

Life has been far from easy for Perrier, who was born in Thunder Bay. She was sexually abused by a family friend when she was young and, by the time she was 12, had been in and out of drug rehab and group homes and was working as a street prostitute. By 15 she had a baby boy, Tanner, and nine months later he was diagnosed with leukemia.

She and her son came to Toronto and Sick Children's Hospital for help. While she was here she returned to a life of prostitution, becoming addicted to painkillers while her son was in hospital. She eventually signed over her son to the care of her parents.

At 21, as she served time in jail on a drug charge, her son's leukemia returned and the doctors told her there was nothing they could do. "It was heartbreaking," she said. "You don't imagine burying your own child.' He died three days after she was released from

prison. They spent his last three days together.

"The morning of his death...I was alone with him," Perrier recalled. "He said: Mommy, pinkie swear you have to be good now.' I made a promise to him. I think it was his way of saying I forgive you. He always believed in me. When he passed away, I just knew I was either going to die with him or do really good."

Perrier returned to Toronto and sought refuge at a YWCA women's shelter, had two more children and began to rebuild her life. She kicked her addiction to painkillers and did a pre-college prep course at Seneca College before getting accepted into George Brown College's community worker program.

She's currently working in a placement at Native Child and Family Services and loves it. "It seems so natural for me. That's probably the reason I went into social work — because of my past. I have had social workers who didn't understand anything about me."