

# Support group offers lifeline to those in need

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**M**artin Nicolaus never really acknowledged his own drinking problem until his son, 10-years-old at the time, asked him if he was a drunkard.

"He came across the word in a school book and asked me if I was one. That shocked me a great deal. I also realized it was true," Nicolaus said.

It was that moment in time 12 years ago that compelled Nicolaus to check into a recovery program where they offered both Alcoholics Anonymous and LifeRing. In the program, he found a lifeline in LifeRing.

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**JASON KELLY  
GUELPH LIFERING**

"I tried LifeRing and I stayed. I owe my life to it," he said.

The California-based network of support groups for people who want to live free of alcohol and other addictions, is holding its annual conference at the University of Guelph this weekend.

"We are a relatively new organization, but we're growing," Nicolaus, LifeRing's chief executive officer, said in a phone interview earlier this week, adding there are support groups in 22 American states plus groups in Canada, Japan and Australia.

Alcoholics Anonymous is perhaps the best-known organization to help people overcome their addiction to alcohol. Nicolaus said LifeRing shares AA's abstinence-based, support group format.

"But the main difference is that LifeRing is more inclusive in the sense that we don't require a spiritual conviction," Nicolaus said. "We're neither for nor against religions."

As well, Nicolaus said the focus at LifeRing meetings is for participants to build their own personal recovery plan rather than following a prescribed 12-step program.

"There are a lot of ways to get clean and sober and the important thing is finding the way that works for each individual.

"A lot of people try AA and fail and think that's it. There's no way out. We offer an alternative," he said.

Nicolaus said the purpose of the congress is socializing, education, and governance.

The weekend concludes with the annual general meeting and election of delegates to lead in the coming term.

He is excited about the guest speakers — an addiction researcher, an author and a counsellor who trains other health professionals.

Charlotte Kasl is the author of the ground-breaking book *Many Roads One Journey: Moving Beyond the 12 Steps*, in which she outlines an alternate roadmap to recovery.

She'll be speaking in Guelph about helping people find their own voice and accept themselves.

Ronald E. Warner is director of the Toronto-based Solution Focused Therapy, which trains health professionals to empower their clients to move beyond their problems and find solutions.

Alan Ogborne was a researcher with Ontario's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health and now acts as a consultant to the World Health Organization and Health Canada, among other agencies.

Jason Kelly, who runs a LifeRing group in Guelph and is co-ordinator of the weekend conference, expects 80 people to attend.

"Most credible addiction professionals today indicate that offering choices for people in recovery struggling with addiction enhances their chances of success. Guelph needs choices," Kelly said.

"LifeRing offers a fresh perspective on how to find positive and supportive ways of dealing with addictions. Everyone in the community is welcome to come to this conference."

Registration is at 8:15 a.m. Saturday at Rozanki Hall or at the University Faculty Club on the fifth floor of the University Centre Friday night at 6:30 during the reception.

For more information, visit [www.unhooked.com](http://www.unhooked.com).

• With files from Deirdre Healey