

Saving Lives Takes a Deep Commitment

Introducing the John Volken Academy

The uncomfortable topic of addictions and complex dysfunctions are easily averted in the normal course of our busy lives. But the issues are not only real, they are too close to ignore – be it on the streets of

our towns, on the evening news or in families that we know. The solutions are neither simple, nor easy. John Volken is one man whose own journey has compelled him to 'light a candle, rather than curse the darkness.'

The John Volken Academy's Surrey campus is attractive, welcoming and life-changing for the students that are willing to make a two-year commitment to rebuild themselves and their futures.



The attractive PricePro supermarket openly engages with customers at a personal level, while providing work skills and confidence to students.



Apollo the celebrity bison stud may not realize he is part of the journey of healing for many students at the Academy farm in Langley. (L-R) Coleman, Matt, Jay and Travis are students enjoying their work roles at the farm. Uve Volken, Chawna and John Volken. Laila, Marc, Doran and Bil are some of the managers at the John Volken Academy Farm.



Every customer leaves knowing their purchases are making a difference.



Tars and Kash Cheema

Introducing John Volken

While many will know John Volken as the magnate behind the wildly successful United Furniture Warehouse chain, precious few know the deeper tenets of the man behind the John Volken Academy – where their simple tagline states, “we change lives.”

Met warmly by John and his wife Chawna at the Surrey Academy campus, any apprehension we had at meeting a man of his legend quickly dissipated. The soft-spoken man shared his stories, dreams, successes and even shortcomings, as we traveled the road with him that brought him to the greatest calling of his life.

Growing up in East Germany, John smiles and recounts his childhood dream of having the storybook farm – with ducks, geese, cattle, the pond...peace and pastures. Though his life journey was much different, he never lost that idyllic dream.

When he arrived as a wide-eyed 18-year old in Toronto in 1960 with just \$90 in his pocket, he spoke Russian and German, but no English. “I spent my first two days at the rail station, eating Wonderbread,” he tells us with a smirk. A German-speaking woman he met at the train station resulted in his first job in Canada – on a cauliflower farm...not exactly the dream farm job!

Seizing Opportunities and Accidentally Finding Faith

In North Bay, Ontario, John first worked for a florist before putting in six years at a trailer factory. A man of great energy and ambition, he also bought, renovated and rented houses (in his 'spare' time). By his late 20's, he owned 24 houses in North Bay. Moving to Montreal, he became the top salesman for a large freezer-food company. Then, a random invitation to Mexico saw him take an unexpected two-year layover in Las Vegas. Even more unexpected was

the chance encounter with a woman whose family welcomed him and led him to church. It was a pivotal juncture in young John's life, and he would never be the same again. From here, John came to Vancouver, first working with a meat business, but before long, he started his first used consignment furniture store – United Buy and Sell. But it was the inclusion of affordable (budget) new furniture that set the business up for success. The second store in Surrey struggled for several years, so it wasn't all smooth sailing, but he persevered and opened successive stores – all the way to Ontario and eventually into the western US. After operating United Furniture Warehouse for 20 years, John sold the chain of stores to the Brick. His heart was stirring with something much deeper.

A Greater Calling

At the age of 60, John had been successful by anyone's measure – but he longed to do something of greater value. Motivated by his faith and the recognition of the struggles of people around him, he began the John Volken Foundation. It was a chance meeting with the Kenyan Foreign Minister that took him to Kenya where he saw the great need. Through the Foundation he began supporting orphanages in Africa, eventually becoming 'Lift the Children' where today, they support over 14,000 orphans through 92 orphanages.

A meeting with local leaders of Union Gospel Mission and the Salvation Army helped him see that something more must be done – and sooner – to help change the tragic lives of those trapped in destructive cycles of addiction, dysfunction and homelessness. John volunteered, prayed and contemplated over what was needed. He became aware of 'therapeutic communities' and visited several in Italy first, then others in Europe and closer to home. He came to realize that the short term programs were mere Band-Aids and that **real change** needed **real commitment** and it needed a holistic approach. Out of

this was born the John Volken Academy – a carefully planned, two-year program with multiple layers of support, to ensure every student has the opportunity to change their life for the better and *become who they were meant to be!*

The John Volken Academy

The three JVA campuses provide so much more than just 'addiction recovery,' “I realized we had to teach them how to **live**,” John exclaims with deep conviction.

The 'therapeutic communities' provide recovery services in concert with life skills, career training and personal growth. Each location has a business enterprise that engages the students in learning to work, contribute, build skills and gain self-confidence. In Arizona, the campus includes a horse farm, with the students enthusiastically taking part in running the farm and caring for the horses. In Surrey, the students participate in actively running the PricePro supermarket, and soon, there will be a buffalo/bison farm in operation in Langley.

John's interest in changing the lives of these tragically trapped people took him right into the eye of the storm – he dove in to understand the nature of their addictions, their shackled existence that saw them fail over and again, leaving them further demoralized and hopeless with every downward cycle. “It can take up to five years for full brain recovery, but two years is pretty typical,” he explains. “We give them the tools...we teach them...we support them.” It's clear that John wants to be close to the action – it **matters** that the program is reaching each young person.

Families are asked to pay a minimal amount towards the two-year program – it's a token investment to ensure they are onboard to see their loved-one through. “It takes time for

them to change their behaviour. Addicts fight for every day, we help them work through their anger, if they get frustrated, we hold 'encounter groups' twice a week, where they can talk through their frustration. Then the penny drops and their behaviour changes,” John shares his observations from working with the students closely. While stumbles can be forgiven, there are consequences. Accountability is essential. **So is forgiveness and acceptance.** “We want them to 'handle stuff' and check themselves with a positive response,” John says. I think of one student who told me earlier that he repeatedly got into trouble at work because his temper ruled his behaviour. When he lost his last job, he “knew it was over” for him, unless he got serious help – the short-term programs had not solved his recurring downward spirals.

John believes that the most essential element for change is **humility**. From that comes gratitude, acceptance and holding yourself and others accountable, he shares his insight.

John is beyond excited to see the opening of the milking water buffalo farm in Langley this Fall – his long ago dream of the peaceful, idyllic farm is coming to life in spectacular vision. The students have already been actively involved with various roles from welding and giving public tours, to caring for the animals and feeding/cleaning. “I'm grateful that I've got it in me to do this – this is what I want to do...” John concludes.

We are excited to follow-up next issue with coverage of the unique buffalo farm (with both parlour and robot) and multiple training elements for the students. And we look forward to sharing some stories from the students who openly shared parts of their difficult journeys and their remarkable recoveries with us this summer.

Check out www.volken.org to learn more and be inspired.