

Addiction - And the Road to Recovery: Part II - Residential Treatment Offers Hope

By Scott Laird

The road to recovery from addiction problems can often be long and arduous. Families suffer, lives come unraveled, and help can be hard to find. Rural communities continue to be hard hit by alcohol addiction and problems with drugs, especially Methamphetamine, (or Meth for short). Gambling is now recognized as an addiction problem that is more widespread than was realized. Drug and alcohol abuse continues to affect the youth of our communities. In this three part series, Vernonia's Voice looks at how to find help, get into treatment, and stay in recovery.

Addiction is a disease. Like cancer, like hypertension, like diabetes. Our genes and lifestyle choices make some of us more prone to being affected. And yet as a society we tend to treat those that suffer from addiction as if they are at fault, that they do it to themselves.

Almost every one of us has either suffered from, or knows someone close to us who suffers from, addiction in some form or another.

My recent visit to the Columbia Community Mental Health's (CCMH) Creekside facility in St. Helens was a clear reminder that lack of funding is a crucial issue in the ability of a community to provide rehabilitation services for those suffering from addiction.

Last month I visited with Dr. Scott Christy, the Addictions Program Manager at CCMH, and talked about the availability of treatment services in Columbia County. Dr. Christy helped me arrange a visit this month to Pathways, a residential in-patient treatment program for adult addicts.

After initially driving past the small sign that identifies the Pathways facility, a house in the middle of a neighborhood block, my visit started with a tour of the facility with Administrator Kevin Parsons and Admissions Coordinator Shelly Kimball. The resident clients were in a closed-door group session, protecting their confidentiality. I was shown dormitory style rooms upstairs with more beds for women than men. Offices for therapists are scattered both upstairs and down. There is a common eating area, an outside patio where clients are allowed to smoke, a living room. There are pay phones to make outside calls. Kevin noted the homey feel. "As you can see, it doesn't feel institutional," he said. Then we sat down to talk about what they do.

I started out asking about their backgrounds. Kevin Parsons has been with Columbia Community Mental Health agency for five years. He is a Licensed Professional Counselor in the State of Oregon as well as a Certified Alcohol and Drug Counselor III. He had worked in the Bridges men's program at the County Jail before it lost its funding, and then he worked with adolescents. Two years ago he became the Administrator of Pathways. "Shelly has a much more interesting story," Parsons said.

"I was a client here," Shelly started out. "After I finished treatment I lived in our transitional housing. I stayed sober for the two years that are required and then applied for a job here and was hired. Because of some criminal behavior that was discovered in my past, I was terminated by the state, but I fought that and was re-instated. I started out as on-call support staff and have worked my way up to Admissions Coordinator.

"We have over 100 years of combined sobriety on staff here," Parsons added, himself a success with 18 years of sobriety. I think about this. Who better to help an addict find hope than people who have been successful in recovery?

"One of the models we use when looking at problem behaviors is called the Stages of Change," said Parsons. "The stages of change are Pre-contemplation, Contemplation, Preparation, Action, and Maintenance, and Relapse. Most clients think they are in the Action phase when they are here in rehab, but really most of them are in Pre-contemplation because most likely someone has told them to be here, either family, the justice system, or county services. We want them to use their time in residential treatment to have an honest conversation with themselves."

"Being here is an opportunity to increase their readiness and motivation to change," continued Parsons. "We offer exposure to self help like AA and NA (Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous) meetings that they can attend. We encourage them to have a temporary sponsor while in the system that can offer support. There is a

very active Twelve Step community here in Columbia County which helps support recovering-addicts. Our clients are encouraged to attend Twelve Step meetings or Church or any group that might provide some kind of a sober-support system."

Treatment can last from twenty-one days to over ninety days, depending on the needs of the client and their ability to pay.

The problem of funding and space availability cannot be ignored. With only sixteen beds available, there can be a tremendously long wait, especially for an indigent bed. While Pathways serves the entire State, Columbia, Clatsop and Tillamook counties are prioritized. Nine of the sixteen beds are reserved for those eligible for the Oregon Health Plan. Three of those beds are reserved for indigent clients, those who have no funding available to them. Seven beds are reserved for private pay clients, including clients sent from corrections facilities and insurance programs that are paying. Pathways has one of two beds in the state that receives funding through the State lottery program to pay for gambling respite treatment.

"Private pay clients might wait two weeks or longer for a space to open. Those folks that need an indigent space can wait six to eight months, sometimes as long as a year," CCMH Addictions Program Manager Scott Christy had told me. Parsons and Kimball confirmed this.

But once a client is admitted into the program and becomes a resident, Pathways provides an encompassing and holistic approach to recovery.

"We have a system of social responsibility where our clients are asked to hold each other accountable," Parsons told me. Added Shelly Kimball, "They have rules they have to follow, and some of them have never had to do this before. They are assigned a buddy to help them learn the rules. Sometimes we have to have a 'focus' where we do an ongoing process group and talk about the effect of their behavior on their values and on the Pathways community. We end up teaching a lot of life skills as well. Personal hygiene, doing laundry, and housecleaning are among these. These are things some people have never learned to do. Instead of rehabilitation, sometimes what we have to do is just plain habilitation, and learning how to live."

I was especially interested in how addicts have been able to find success in recovery. "There are many paths to recovery," said Parsons. "The person is the change-agent and they need to work their own program. However, there are suggestions and the reminder that nobody does this alone. You have to have like-minded people around you. You have to identify a support system.

One recognized successful program is the Twelve Step or AA model that is often mistakenly identified with religion and attending church. Was finding Jesus a prerequisite for finding recovery?

"The Twelve Step Program does have a spiritual focus, but it is about a life of self examination," explained Parsons. "It's about finding the God of your understanding, and there can be many different personal concepts for this."

I was also interested in the incidence of relapse from recovery and not only its

effects on the addict, but also on the staff that works with the client. Isn't this frustrating helping someone realize their mistakes and identify their issues, only to see them return months later, back in trouble?

"Relapse is just a stage of change, a normal part of change," Parsons told me. "It only means they have stopped doing what was working. Often we are dealing with second and third generation addicts. Relapse is expected and likely to happen, so we don't look at it as a failure, we see relapse, viewed through the lens of honest self-examination as one of the greatest tools for recovery."

"We can't change anyone, it's their decision," added Kimball. "When we see someone again, we're just grateful that they made it back. We also get to see clients who are being successful, who come back to visit, bring their children. That's what makes this so worthwhile. Pain is part of the growth process, but so is joy".

Family involvement can play a huge role in successful recovery from addiction. When the family is actively involved in recovery, there is a greater chance of success. Pathways encourages family involvement beginning with the admissions process. "We ask the family to write a letter to the client, telling them about the impact their addiction has had on those who really care about them," said Kimball "We use those later in our process. They can be a very powerful tool once someone is ready." There are also Family Process Group sessions, Family Therapy interns who work with the clients and families, and visiting days on Saturdays, including shared meals to encourage full family involvement.

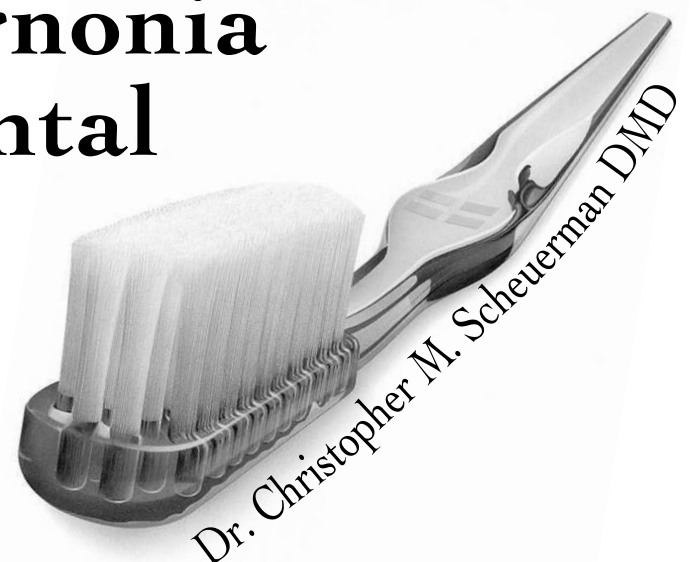
When the client has concluded their Rehabilitation stay, there are several options. They always have a scheduled appointment for ongoing outpatient care. There is transitional apartment living space available downstairs from the residential facility, offering structured lifestyle, support close by, and reasonable rent. There are support groups like the Alano Club, a social organization and non-profit that supports sober lifestyles with potlucks, speaker programs, dances and holiday celebrations. And there are AA meetings, designed to help maintain sobriety. AA members share their experience, strength and hope by speaking about what it was like, what happened, and what it's like now.

"The biggest thing we can do is instill hope," concluded Parsons. "Hope that the addict can change.

Dr. Scott Christy left me with these words, "Peoples lives do get better."

Next month: Meet some success stories.

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