

**BEGINNING, from page 4**

Hooper Nursing Manager Deb Malsom knows the situation well.

"Everybody is looking at their own mortality when they are trying to come into detox." Her staff monitors them through sometimes painful and life-threatening withdrawals, making sure their vitals remain stable and that they're eating food and drinking water. She says Rodriguez detoxed at Hooper seven times over the years and, despite being at some of the lowest points in his life, "he was just a complete gentleman every time."

Malsom says it can be humiliating for addicts when they return to Hooper again and again.

"It's like admitting defeat," she says.



When Rodriguez was arrested in January 2009, he was 36, addicted to alcohol and heavy drugs, he was homeless and suffering from depression – and he had not been legitimately employed once in his entire life.

Facing another prison stint for delivery of a controlled substance, Rodriguez says he caught a break.

"The judge already knew when he look at my record that all my problems (were) drug related," he says. "He told me, 'I'm going to give you a chance. I'm going to try something different with you this time, I want you to go to treatment.'"

After serving 90 days in jail and then spending the summer months avoiding the inevitable, he gave in and entered a treatment program at Central City Concern's Eastside Campus called Puentes. The program name is Spanish for "bridges."

When he began treatment, he was still using. He had unsuccessfully attempted treatment before, but this time it was different. For one, he says, the program "was in my language." But he was different too. After 15 years of struggling to survive a life of addiction and crime in a foreign country, he says, "I was tired. I was done."

Rodriguez had to commit a full year of his life to his recovery program at Puentes, becoming heavily involved and immersing

himself in the course material. His treatment program ran the gamut – from mental health counseling for his depression to anger management and drug and alcohol treatment.

"I wish I have words that I can express how grateful I am to Puentes," he says. "To society, I was a drug addict and ex con, a drug dealer, a criminal, and when I got to Puentes, I was treated as a human being, and I was treated as a person for – really – who I am. I was treated with respect, love. It was the first time, I would say, in my life. There were people willing to do things for me, unconditionally."

When he graduated, Rodriguez didn't want to sever his ties to Puentes.

"When it was over, I was empty handed," he says. "While you're in treatment, you become part of that treatment. When you really want to get clean and you want to change your life, that's your everything. But treatment (typically) is three to six months, after that you feel like you are alone."

That's why, he says, he and a few of his classmates decided to organize a Puentes alumni group.

For the past four years, the group has met once per month, and its members mentor students in Puentes' treatment programs. "We keep guiding the newcomers in recovery so they still feel part of something," he says.

The Puentes alumni group is unique. Often in Latino culture, there's a stigma attached to receiving drug and alcohol or mental health treatment. It's seen as "a kind of weakness" says Rodriguez. The alumni group works to help change that perception in Portland's Latino community. Rodriguez says he explains to people in recovery that this cultural stigma, "It's a myth."

A common complaint is that participating in treatment will ruin a person's reputation, to that he tells them, "You are just thinking of what people are going to think about you. But you don't think what people are thinking

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right now about what you're doing, and that's worse."

Rodriguez had overcome his addictions, but he still needed work. He couldn't go back to selling drugs and now, at 37, he still had no work history to put on an employment application.

Puentes helped him land a six-month janitorial gig with Clean and Safe in Downtown Portland, and after that he bounced around between temporary jobs for a couple years. It was during that time he found love and brought a handsome and bright-eyed little boy, Geovani Jr., into the world.

When Rodriguez graduated from Puentes, he assumed his days at the Hooper Detox were over, but in October 2013, he once again found himself walking through the doors of the clinic.



"I didn't believe it was really happening," he remembers thinking when he walked in. He had worked diligently to stay clean in the years since his repeated bouts with defeat while detoxing at the clinic.

But this time was different. Hooper had moved to a new location on North Williams, and Rodriguez was a new man. He wasn't there to writhe in the anguish of withdrawal; he was there to help others who were.

He was hired as on-call support and after two weeks of training he began work as a subacute technician (SAT). He was offered a union position within the month, and has worked there ever since.

Malsom, who remembers him from his visits as a patient, is now his supervisor. She says he carries that piece of empathy and compassion that she looks for in her SATs.

"When you're withdrawing from any kind of substance, you know the story, they're irritable," says Malsom. "When you can have an SAT that can share their experiences to help get somebody through that, I think it's

beneficial."

Rodriguez often works graveyard and swing shifts, helping to monitor and assist patients occupying the clinic's 65 beds. "This is hard work. It isn't easy by any means," says Malsom. But you wouldn't know that from speaking with Rodriguez.

"When you enjoy the job, there is not a day of work," he says, beaming.

Malsom says she admires Rodriguez's soul and compassion. "I've seen him offer support, and I've seen him go the extra mile and help patients and encourage them, as much as he can in his role," she says.

Rodriguez knows exactly what his patients are going through. "When you get to a point where you are in a bed in a detox clinic," he says, "most of the time, you (have) lost everything. That's your last stop and from there, it's a new beginning. And what I try to do is encourage people to go to treatment, to recovery, to the steps, to the books. I always tell people, 'What is lost is lost, you know. But tomorrow is a new start.'"

For Rodriguez, tomorrow has come and gone. He's lives life today as a dedicated family man, living with his girlfriend and their son in Southeast Portland. Most important now, he says, "My son's education. Being an example for my son."

"I have fun with my family. We go to restaurants, to movies – every weekend we have something to do as a family. That's how I live my life these days," he says, "Right now, nothing scares me."

He's also reignited his childhood passion for fishing, only now he fishes for sturgeon off the Bonneville Dam rather than for big-game tropical fish off the coast of Havana. This summer he's looking forward to teaching Geovani Jr. to fish for the first time. He's also getting ready to further his own education. Maybe, he says, he will study to be a drug and alcohol counselor, but nothing's been decided yet.

"He is one of my favorite stories," says Puentes Director Daniel Garcia, remembering Rodriguez fondly. "A true story of success."

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