

Treatment: ‘When you’re ready, you’re ready’

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Each day, the residents do some form of group activity that focuses on cognitive restructuring. That can include relapse prevention; conflict resolution; step group, which goes over the 12 steps of Narcotics Anonymous and the Acceptance Commitment Therapy (ACT) group, which focuses on cognitive restructuring. Those groups focus on understanding addiction and relapse as processes, and identifying situations that put them at risk.

They also delve into their personal histories, attempting to understand what brought them to this point, and working to forgive themselves and move forward.

One exercise is the “breakup letter,” in which residents write a letter saying goodbye to whatever substances they used.

Adriahna Ashard, a 21-year-old resident at the women’s house, read two letters — one to meth and one to heroin.

“You’ve affected me since I was born,” she said in her first letter. Her father had used the drug, and she wanted to understand why he was different when he took it, which ultimately led to her using.

Calmly, she said she didn’t regret what had happened, because it gave her a better understanding of her father.

“Now, we’re fighting this battle together,” she said. “I don’t blame you or hate you. But I no longer need you.”

After these exercises, other residents offer feedback and support.

“What I liked is that you weren’t mad,” said a resident after Ashard read her letter. “That logical response — you made the decision that it’s not part of your life anymore. That makes me confident in you.”

Many residents said it’s been helpful to understand that addiction is not simply a choice to keep doing drugs, but has a biological base and changes the way the brain functions.

“Growing up with my mom as an addict, people would say, don’t do drugs, don’t do drugs,” said one female resident during a group session. “But nobody explained it to me like that. I wish someone would have said that to me.”

Starting young

Though each person’s story of abuse and recovery is different, many of the residents have faced adversity that led to drug use.

Amanda Carey, 29, will graduate at the end of this week. The mother of two started using pills in her early teens, and heroin at age 18. She got sober at 20, and stayed that way for five years, but then relapsed and quickly started using fentanyl and heroin.



Residents at the men’s house play a game of horse after a group counseling session at the Power House Treatment Center on Wednesday outside of Hermiston.

“I think — I had a pretty rough childhood,” she said. “I had some childhood traumas, and my parents didn’t know how to deal with them or seek help, so I kind of pushed those traumas down.”

Before arriving at Power House, she described hitting her lowest point.

“I had no fear of dying,” she said. “I was hoping for it, and I desperately needed something different.”

She said the peer-led community here has made it a more comfortable place for her to seek treatment.

“The way strong women in recovery run this place, we get to be strong women in recovery,” she said.

Kaden Stice, 25, grew up in Umatilla, and said he started using drugs when he was about 15. He said he had issues of chronic pain, and after one trip to the emergency room doctors prescribed him pain medications, which he soon began abusing.

He was 21 years old the first time he overdosed. He said he remembers waking up in the hospital and not even knowing who his girlfriend was.

“That OD really (expletive) me up,” he said. “I lost an entire month I can’t recall.”

Despite several attempts to quit, health issues and family tragedies set him back. But it wasn’t always monumental events that led to his relapse.

“One of the guys I graduated with here,” he said, “I offered to take him and his girlfriend out to eat, and they asked me to take them to pick up some stuff. It blew me away that that’s all it took for me to go out and use.”

He is in Power House for the second time, and is set to graduate Jan. 22.

“I’m trying to figure out what I missed last time,” he



Mallory Weber of St. Helens reads a letter from her mother during a group counseling session at the Power House Treatment Center women’s house on Wednesday outside of Hermiston.

said. “I think the key for me is to always continue doing the next right thing. If I’m always doing the right thing, there’s not really any chance for me to relapse.”

Jason Werder, a 34-year-old from Toledo, said this was his seventh attempt at getting clean.

“Growing up was real tough,” he said. “My mom was a pretty severe drug addict. She’s clean now, 22 or 23 years.”

Throughout his childhood he lived in tents and trailers, even on mattresses in the park.

“I started when I was eight, smoking weed, huffing gas, pills,” he said.

He entered foster care when he was 14.

“I got to see the structure of a real family — even just eating at a table, going to school. So for four years, ages 14 to 18, I didn’t do drugs.”

But then he moved back to the coast, started using drugs again, and soon went to prison. He’s been imprisoned twice, and in county jail more than 50 times.

Werder had been clean for 10 months last year, when two things sent him back.

“My oldest son, who was 14, wrecked a truck and

died,” he said.

Shortly after, he found out that his father had been killed. At that time, Werder was in Power House, but he was allowed to leave to take care of his father’s funeral. When he left, he started using again. He returned to Power House in late December, after going to the facility’s detox center in Otis.

Ripple effect

Despite the childhood traumas that catalyzed drug use for many residents, a key part of treatment is accepting responsibility and acknowledging that their use can have a ripple effect on those around them.

Casey Sanders, the director of the women’s house, said she thinks often about the way her own addiction affected her family.

She started using drugs recreationally in her early teens, but her addiction reached its peak a little later. She had just had a baby girl, but when her house got raided, her daughter was taken, and Sanders’ mother ended up adopting the baby. Through the next few years she was in and out of jail and her children ended up living with her sister. She said she went to treatment and was

clean for a while, and got her children back. But it took several attempts, and losing her kids a few times.

Throughout her addiction, she said her family tried to help.

“My sister reached out to me that day, and asked if she could help me get away from where I was.”

Sanders teared up.

“She just wanted to help me. She was super sad.”

It took a while longer for Sanders to accept that help, but she finally did.

“Now, five and a half years later, life is pretty amazing,” she said. “My kids are recovering. It’s not just us that recover — it’s our families too.”

Though many of the residents are optimistic about recovery, the work doesn’t stop once they leave Power House.

“It’s always ‘recovering,’ said Pearl Peña, a recovering addict and women’s house counselor. “It’s a life-long process. Here, we don’t even cover the basics of how to live a recovery life. Three months is not enough.”

Instead, she said, the center focuses on the immediate aftermath of getting clean, cognitive restructuring and healing — as well as connecting them with outpatient facilities or sober living houses when they leave.

The right path

As they go through treatment, each resident learns about what coping mechanisms and techniques work for them.

“We have a lot of free time here,” said Men’s House director Caryn Dunn. “It helps them learn how to cope with being bored, and trying to figure out things to do other than getting high.”

Some find it helpful to do art, listen to music or focus on specific programs in treatment.

Ashard said she has recently started poi, a form of rhythmic dance that includes swinging tethered weights. She also said hearing what others have gone through, as well as sharing her own story, has helped her.

“Some days, something just clicks for you,” she said.

“For me, it’s going to church, Celebrate Recovery and NA,” Werder said. He said he has to make sure he doesn’t hang out with old friends who use. But the biggest motivator is his family.

Werder writes poems, draws and sends artwork home to his children, and talks with them through video messaging every day.

“I have three kids that are still alive,” he said. “They’re six, eight and 10. Being with them, working, going to church — I don’t have time to use.”

The other side of the table

Most of the counselors at Power House are on a path residents hope to follow — recovering addicts who are now helping others with their treatment.

“It’s really hard to go to treatment with counselors who have never done drugs,” said Werder. “They’ve gone to school, have a degree in it, but they never truly know what you went through.”

Peña said it’s been a great feeling to help others with the struggles she had.

“The way I was treated (in recovery) — that’s the way I treat my clients.”

Some residents are court-ordered to treatment, and some are referred by programs like Community Corrections or the Department of Human Services.

Jim Meyers, assistant director of Umatilla County Community Corrections, said a few years ago the county did the “New Life” program, where everyone released from custody had to go to inpatient treatment. They had Portland State University review the program.

“We found that it was largely ineffective for those who didn’t want to go, but were required to,” he said. “But it was very effective for people who did ask to go.”

Dunn said people do relapse, but with some, the time that they’re back in addiction before seeking help again gets shorter — someone may go from using again for six months, down to three, and then down to 30 days before they seek help again.

“That means there’s progress being made,” Dunn said.

Residents said there is no formula for recovery, but rather a personal reckoning that makes them decide that they want to stay clean.

“I think a lot of it has to do with if you’ve been through enough pain,” Sanders said. “I don’t think there’s a key. When you’re ready, you’re ready.”

Bill: ‘We’re real conscientious about what we leave on’

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the bill from Pacific Power, but this past December the bill shows that rocketed to 1,102 kilowatts. The bill also shows both periods had the same daily average temperature of 37. Even with his 19-year-old son staying part of the month, he said, there is no way he was using that much electricity.

“It’s not that we’re getting billed higher for what we’re using, we’re getting billed for what where not using,” Peterson said.

He expressed his frustration with the matter on Facebook, explaining he turned off everything except his refrigerator and water heater, yet “as I’m walking by my power meter I look and it’s spinning like a damn top.”

Peterson’s post energized numerous locals to report



Pacific Power customer Seth Peterson holds his bill showing nearly a doubling of his power consumption this winter over the same period last year.

they were facing the same situation.

Braxton Warner posted images of his bill showing he used 1,863 kilowatts in December 2017 and 3,187 kilowatts this past December, and again both months

had the same daily average temperature. Amanda Lofting said she works 12-hour shifts and is careful about her power usage, yet her bill went from \$122.50 in November to \$287 in December.

“I was floored,” she said. “Now I’m \$187 behind because my bill just randomly shot up.”

Christian Bloom and her husband Steven Bloom said their jaws dropped when they saw their \$647 electric bill showing use go from 1,894 kilowatts on the November billing to 4,041 kilowatts for the December bill. They said since 2017 they installed a new heater, a new roof and changed from incandescent light bulbs to more energy-efficient LEDs.

“And it didn’t make a difference in the bill,” he said.

Christian Bloom also posted their power problem on Facebook and found plenty of folks dealing with the dilemma.

Tanner Doherty, a 21-year-old forklift operator, said his power bill

went from more than \$300 in November to \$690 last month, making things tight for him, his girlfriend and their daughter.

“It’s a lot, and were real conscientious about what we leave on,” he said. “I don’t make enough money to pay a high power bill to begin with, so we’re always conscientious about how much energy we’re using.”

Pacific Power spokesperson Drew Hanson said out of the company’s 740,000 customers in the Northwest, “high bill anomalies” happen. Meters can malfunction and give “crazy high” levels for energy use, he said, and now and then the company sends out the wrong bill. But the company’s call center has not noticed any spike in complaints for the Pendleton area, he said, so it is diffi-

cult to pin down what might be going on.

Hanson also said customers might just owe what they owe. He encouraged Pacific Power customers with problems to call customer service or visit the company’s website. He said Pacific Power wants to work with its customers to take care of problems right away.

The Pendleton residents said they have called and gotten no traction. Peterson on Friday said he spoke with a customer service representative who said Pacific Power would send someone to review his situation.

“That was two days ago,” he said, and Saturday will be three.

Still, Peterson said he is urging locals to call the power company. He said maybe a big enough surge will get some attention.