

DRUG CENTER HAS SEEN SUCCESS, CONTROVERSY POSSIBILITIES UNLIMITED FACING FINANCIAL CRISIS

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Few could give any program a stronger endorsement than the one Joan Mason gives Possibilities Unlimited.

"It literally saved our son's life," says Mason, who moved her family all the way from Colorado to participate in the Lexington drug treatment program.

Others offer similar praise. But these days Possibilities Unlimited needs more than endorsements. It needs money.

The program is going broke and needs about \$1 million to keep operating, officials said last week.

Possibilities Unlimited has rebounded from troubles before. It has struggled financially during most of its eight-year history. It has seen controversy. Some have accused it of carrying tough discipline to the point of abuse.

But this might be its most serious crisis yet.

Founder and executive director George Ross says that declining client enrollments, plus the expense of underwriting clients who cannot afford to pay, caused the financial crunch.

No new clients are being accepted. The 26 youngsters now enrolled will be allowed to complete treatment, Ross says. But after that the future is uncertain. Ross says the program might move to Louisville, merge with some local hospital, close temporarily or launch a fund drive.

No one is more unhappy about all that than the parents who have seen Possibilities Unlimited pull their teens out of the dungeon depths of drug abuse. Losing the disciplined, family-style treatment program would be a major blow for Lexington, many of them say.

"I don't think the public realizes what it would mean if the program had to close," Joan Mason says. She thinks her son might be dead today if he had not found Possibilities Unlimited. Other parents think the same thing of their youngsters.

"It was a lifesaver for our entire family," says Carolyn Holmes of Georgetown, whose son was treated at Possibilities Unlimited three years ago. "Even to this day if we're having a problem, or my son has a problem, we know we can go back there and find people who will listen."

Holmes says she has recommended the program to many other people.

John Mullins of Frankfort had two sons in the program. One finished treatment and is doing well, Mullins said. The other dropped out of the program and later died in a drug-related incident, he said. Mullins still endorses the program.

"It's tough, there's no doubt about that. In all honesty, there were things I didn't agree with. But when you're dealing with people involved with drugs you can't do normal things.

"If I had to do it over, knowing the results would be the same, I probably still would."

Even if Possibilities Unlimited moved to Louisville, it would still accept clients from the Lexington area. And even if the program closed, Lexington still would have a variety of treatment programs available.

But Mary Ann Burdette, who has been a director of Possibilities Unlimited since its inception, says many would suffer if the program were lost.

"There will be kids who won't get help," she said. "And there will be parents who will suffer in ways that, unless you've been there, you can't know how horrible it is."

But there are some who would not be sorry to see Possibilities Unlimited go. Minva Gayle Hodgins of Lexington once sent two daughters to the program. Now, she "couldn't in good conscience tell anybody to put their child in there."

Hodgins' daughter Edith was one of a handful of Possibilities Unlimited clients who filed charges against Ross in 1985, contending that he

kept them in the program against their will. Some program employees also were charged.

Ross ultimately was found not guilty in Fayette District Court, and charges against the workers were dropped.

At the time, Hodgins spoke favorably about Possibilities Unlimited. But she says she has changed her mind.

"I think the idea of the program is good, but I really don't agree with some of the things they do. I know they need to contain kids long enough to get drugs out of their system, but there are better ways to do it."

The Possibilities Unlimited program is rigorous. Its biggest backers admit that.

Treatment can last up to two years, and Ross promises only a 50-50 chance of a cure. The program employs a "tough love" approach in which individual responsibility is stressed. Early in the regimen, clients at the program's headquarters on Briar Hill Road are constantly supervised. They cannot watch TV, make phone calls or have other privileges.

Parents are expected to participate in regular weekend therapy sessions that might add up to hundreds of hours. They sometimes are expected to take clients into their homes.

Supporters say that not every family is willing to make such a commitment. But for those who do, discipline is a big reason why the program works, program backers say.

However, the controversy sparked by the 1985 court case has never entirely faded. And it might have set the stage for Possibilities Unlimited's current troubles.

Client sign-ups declined sharply after Ross' trial -- a problem he blamed on bad publicity. Possibilities Unlimited seemed on the verge of closing in 1985 until client sign-ups rebounded.

But Burdette says they never fully recovered.

"Even though we were exonerated, people still remember that court case," she said. "From the time of that court case we have had difficulty with client in-takes."

The crusher came this spring when only five new people signed up, compared with 15 or 20 that normally would have been expected. The declining numbers and the cost of treating clients who cannot pay are threatening to push Possibilities Unlimited over the edge, he says.

The program's charge for a full-paying client is about \$15,000 for 18 months of treatment. Still, Ross says that is a bargain compared with many other programs.

Some insurance programs will cover part of the cost of treatment. But Ross says that about two-thirds of his clients cannot afford to pay. The program, however, underwrites the treatment of non-paying clients. No one is turned away because of money, Ross says.

The main reason client in-takes are down, he contends, is the growing number of treatment drug programs. Parents have a wide range of choices, he says, and many parents opt for programs with shorter, less stringent treatment regimens.

"They're looking for the quick cure," he says.

That works against Possibilities Unlimited in another way, Ross says. The parents use up their insurance or cash reserves on softer treatment programs, then cannot pay when they elect to try Possibilities Unlimited, he says.

The need for the program is as strong, if not stronger, than ever, he says. He says teen drug abuse might be getting less public attention, but that is because youngsters are shifting from marijuana and cocaine to alcohol, a more socially acceptable drug.

But just where Possibilities Unlimited will fit into the picture remains unclear.

Ross says the program needs \$1 million to offset its operating deficits, make capital improvements and create a long-term endowment.

"We've been operating on a bare-bones budget for the last three years," he said. "We can't keep on living hand to mouth."

But raising private donations promises to be difficult in tough economic times. The program has never taken government funds, and officials fear that doing so now would mean surrendering control to bureaucrats. Ross said further cutbacks would sacrifice program quality, something he says he is not ready to do.

Basically, he says, program officials are looking for some sign of increased community support.

Burdette, a former Fayette County school board member, thinks Possibilities Unlimited warrants help.

"I've seen lives changed by this program; I've seen kids who were dropouts just dragging down themselves and their families go back to school and become contributing members of society.

"I've seen Possibilities Unlimited do miracles."

Now, she says, Possibilities Unlimited might need a few miracles of its own.

- **Caption:** Herald-Leader/Janet Worne GEORGE ROSS, executive director, says poor enrollment and patients' inability to pay account for the problems.

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