

NEW DRUG TREATMENT PROGRAM HELPING TEENS LEAD CLEAN LIFE

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They looked like typical teenagers, the kind that would be playing football on a Friday night and leading the cheers for the home team.

Their smiles spoke of good dental care. Their clothes, hairstyles, and their command of language spoke of middle-class living.

But the three who sat at the table in the Rotary Adolescent Treatment Center behind Catawba Heights Baptist Church near Mount Holly last week had been on a trip to hell. They believe they're on the way back, hope they're on their way back, pray they're on their way back.

They all admit they're chemically dependent people - a fancy term for drug addicts.

They're trying to find their way back to a straight, "clean" life at the drug treatment center opened in mid-June after the three Gastonia Rotary clubs raised \$350,000 to finance it.

The girl, a 17-year-old, is a resident of Mecklenburg County. She started experimenting with pot - marijuana for those few remaining people who don't know the street name for the drug popularized by the hippies and flower children of the 1960s.

She got it from a boyfriend. It soon was used in combination with alcohol, speed, hash, mushrooms.

"You name it, I did it," she said.

She'd been a cheerleader, involved in clubs, a very popular girl.

"I lost interest in about everything, got kicked out of club after club. I had fights with my family. I guess I lost all respect for myself and for other people. Basically, I didn't care about anything except how to get the next hit," she said.

Two 18-year-old male friends listened, nodding agreement with everything she said. Her story of decline from middle-class status to druggie paralleled theirs - except that one of them had wound up in jail for stealing to pay for his habit.

One was introduced to drugs at age 14 at a party, did some drugs "for acceptance and to see what it was like." That led to regular use of pot, Valium, LSD, Quaaludes "about anything I could get a hold of. I took a lot of stuff I didn't even know what it was."

He overdosed on LSD, wound up in a residential drug treatment program and was back on drugs days after he hit the streets again.

The other boy started at age 12 and watched his comfortable middle-class life dissolve.

"I did pot, alcohol, acid, mushrooms, cocaine, hash, Valium, uppers, downers, whatever I could get my hands on. My grades started dropping. At first I kept up pretty well because I was doing drugs mostly on weekends," he said.

But that didn't last long. His friends changed from the preppy achievers to the guys who were always getting into trouble. He felt alienated from his former friends, but superior to the new guys he hung out with. "I looked down on those people, feeling like I was a good, middle-class person."

But when the cash ran out, he stole like virtually every drug addict, he said, to finance his habit.

His parents, who first tried to deny that their kid had a problem, finally admitted their son was in trouble. ``They said the next time they found out I was using drugs, I was long gone (to a treatment center),`` said. ``That day came quicker than I thought.``

He and the other two youths wound up at the Rotary Center shortly after it began accepting clients in mid-June.

The center opened in a building behind First Presbyterian Church in Gastonia and moved to the Catawba Heights Baptist Church fellowship hall in July.

Executive director Frank Edwards said work will begin in January on a permanent home for the center on four acres of land on Woodlawn Road in North Belmont that center trustees are leasing for 30 years from Belmont Abbey for \$1 a year.

``The target date to be in our new quarters is April or May of 1987,`` Edwards said.

Until the 10,000- to 12,000-square-foot building is completed, the center will continue its program at Catawba Heights Baptist, he said.

The center has a therapeutic staff of six people - three primary counselors, a family counselor, a recovery aide and an activity therapist.

Edwards described the Rotary Center treatment plan as ``intensive outpatient therapy.`` The 12 clients enrolled at a cost of \$6,000 each for six months of treatment, live at their homes - which must be within a 50-mile radius to be accepted in the program.

Monday through Friday, clients spend from 8:15 a.m. to 9:30 or 10 p.m. at the center, undergoing individual and group counseling and participating in physical fitness classes such as swimming in the Belmont Abbey College pool and taking aerobics. Saturday hours are from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. and Sunday, 1-7 p.m.

Each client must attend Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous meetings seven nights a week, either at the center or at community meetings in Gaston and Mecklenburg counties.

Edwards said the kids - drawn from Gaston, Lincoln, Cleveland, Mecklenburg, Rowan and Cabarrus counties in North Carolina and from Cherokee and York counties in South Carolina - in the first level of the program work on themselves, basically by using the seven steps to sobriety devised by the Alcoholics Anonymous program. In the second level of treatment, they have more privileges, but also more personal responsibilities.

In the third level, they return to the school system they attended or go to work, returning to the center at nights and on weekends for counseling and activities.

In the fourth level, clients will be weaned from the center, returning for counseling only eight hours a week - plus attending nightly AA or NA meetings. Edwards said an essential element of the program is family participation.

- **Caption: PHOTOEdwards**

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