

ROTARY CENTER HELPS TEENS FIGHT DRUG PROBLEMS

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

The girl, 17, is a resident of Mecklenburg County. She started experimenting with marijuana she got from a boyfriend. It soon was used with alcohol, speed, hashish, mushrooms.

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

She'd been a cheerleader, involved in clubs, a 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 paralleled theirs - except that one had wound up in jail for stealing to pay for his habit.

One was introduced to drugs at age 14 at a party, the other at 12.

When the cash ran out, one boy said, he stole like other addicts to finance his habit.

His parents, who first tried to deny that their son had a problem, finally admitted he 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.

Executive Director Frank Edwards said work will begin in January on a permanent home for the center on 4 acres on Woodlawn Road in North Belmont the center is leasing for 30 years from Belmont Abbey for \$1 a year.

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

The center has a therapy staff of six - 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 for six months at a cost of \$6,000 each. They live at home, which must be within 50 miles of the center.

But most of their life is based at the treatment center, he said.

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.

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.

The center draws clients from Gaston, Lincoln, Cleveland, Mecklenburg, Rowan and Cabarrus counties in North Carolina and from Cherokee and York counties in South Carolina.

Edwards said an essential element of the program is family participation because the thrust of the program is to return the client to the world in which he lives. And the client and family members must learn to cope with drug dependency.

``It's an unending problem,`` he said. ``It's like being a diabetic. You must cope with it for the rest of your life. It's a very complex thing, not simple at all.``

The three clients said they've learned the complexity of their problem - and hope they'll lick it.

``I'm learning about myself. I learning that I am a good person after all,`` one of the boys said. ``I'm learning that I don't have to get high to feel good about myself. I'm learning to enjoy being clean.``

- Memo: This story is reprinted from Gaston Neighbors, a supplement to

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