

Recovery Mission

BY ELLEN BROWN

For students recovering from addiction to alcohol or other substances, Case's Recovery House provides a living environment safe from temptation and supportive of their critical journeys.



Last year, life was looking dismal for Peter,* a boyish-looking Case undergraduate, who formerly lived in a fraternity house on campus. “I was really depressed and lonely, partying all the time, and barely getting by,” he recalls. His academic career also was suffering. Once the valedictorian of his high school, Peter had fallen behind in his schoolwork at Case. He was skipping classes. His grades were plummeting.

Today, life is looking up for the third-year student, who had been smoking marijuana since he was a freshman in high school. He’s glad to be clean and grateful to be a part of the Recovery House, a new, substance-free housing alternative for undergraduate, graduate, and professional school students from Case, the Cleveland Institute of Music, the Cleveland Institute of Art, the Cleveland Clinic Lerner College of Medicine of Case Western Reserve University, and the Ohio College of Podiatric Medicine. The house opened its doors last fall and is one of only three such facilities at colleges and universities across the country.

*The names of students living in the Recovery House have been changed to preserve their anonymity.

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Seeds of Recovery

The seeds for the Recovery House were planted several years ago when staff members at University Counseling Services (UCS) discussed establishing a house or residence hall that offered support for students struggling with a variety of mental health issues, recalls UCS Director Jes Sellers. But the idea remained just an idea; partly because of funding issues and partly because they weren't convinced the idea would work, as there was a scarcity of such programs at other universities. “So the idea was still out there, and ungerminated, but still under our skin,” Dr. Sellers recalls.

Also “out there” was evidence showing that students with substance abuse problems who entered into intensive treatment programs and then returned to previous living arrangements, relapsed. Research shows that when students have a substance abuse problem and go through a treatment program, about eighty percent relapse, Dr. Sellers says. But when people go to a halfway house or another type of intermediary housing afterward, only about twenty percent of those living in that collective group typically relapse. “We saw the numbers personally,” says Joy Willmott (SAS '61), a substance abuse specialist at UCS certified in chemical dependency treatment services. “Relapse is common with the illness of substance abuse, but it's even more common with college students because of the availability and because of the culture on campuses.”

Ms. Willmott explains that Case is no different from other college campuses, in that regard. The majority of students on campus don't abuse alcohol and drugs or binge drink, she says, estimating that about six percent of Case students have a drug or alcohol dependency problem. As a counselor, she has witnessed numerous students struggle with substance abuse problems and relapse. “It just broke my heart,” she says, “to see these students who had developed a measure of strength from recovery and then went back into an environment where the use and abuse of drugs and alcohol were so prevalent, and relapsed, and left school, and never came back.”

Sometimes she'd dream about how wonderful it would be to establish a sanctuary away from the temptations of drinking alcohol and using drugs.

Dream House

Ms. Willmott is delighted that her dream became a reality through the Recovery House, designed to help students at risk remain on campus, make healthy choices, and contribute to Case's learning environment.

The two-unit apartment house, which has the capacity to house a total of six students (both men and women, though only men occupy the house currently) and a resident coordinator, features a comfortable living room, a kitchen, and a porch looking out onto the Little Italy neighborhood. Each unit has two or three bedrooms, which students share.

To be eligible to live in the house, students must have undergone intensive substance abuse treatment and be committed to staying “clean” and working a recovery plan. Developed by each student, under the guidance of a counselor at UCS, the recovery plan includes attending groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, developing personal goals, and possibly continuing on in individual counseling.

They must follow other rules, as well. For example, students are allowed to have visitors, but visitors cannot be inebriated or “high.” Residents are also required to attend Recovery House “community meetings,” led by resident coordinator Joe Veliz, who is specializing in substance abuse through his studies at the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences. The meetings allow Mr. Veliz and the students to discuss the day-to-day operation of the house and voice concerns that may arise.

Mr. Veliz offers support to students, oversees the operation of the residence, and builds a sense of community among housemates. Toward that end, each Sunday the students sit down for a community dinner, prepared by one of the residents.

So far, the living arrangement is working out well, according to Mr. Veliz. “Sometimes I have to be in charge and bring something to someone's attention,” he admits, “but overall, the students are doing a great job. It's good to know there's a place like this on campus where people can live together and not have to drink or do drugs to fit in.”

Support and Incentives

Larry,* a burly man with a quick smile, says he's grateful that the Recovery House was established when it was. The Case undergrad admits that he was “out of control” last

year, but wouldn't listen when his friends at his fraternity house tried to get him to change his ways. Ultimately, his fraternity told him he couldn't live there anymore. He was faced with the choice of either returning home to live with his parents or living in the Recovery House.

Initially, he admits, he wasn't thrilled with his "choice," but his attitude has softened considerably. Today, he's grateful to live in a home that gives him the support and incentives to stay sober.

That's not to say the course he's chosen is an easy one. Larry's recovery plan requires him to attend ninety AA meetings within ninety days, read the "big AA book," attend weekly group counseling sessions, and continue on in individual therapy.

The remainder of his recovery plan revolves around caring for Oscar, his small and wiry companion: a foxhound-Saluki mix. Larry explains that the dog, formerly the family pet, "wasn't doing too well living with my family after I left for school, and I wasn't doing too well without *him*." So, a deal was struck. Oscar would come to live with Larry, if Larry resided in the Recovery House, and the three-year-old dog would be a major part of the student's recovery plan. "Having Oscar here helps out a lot," he says, petting the black and white dog. "Because I have to be responsible for him. I couldn't go out and go on a drinking binge. Because I have to feed him. I have to walk him. I can't disappear for a long period of time. Because he needs me."

Larry admits that Oscar's unconditional love nourishes him and his relationships with others. Having Oscar around helps Larry and his roommate get along better, he says. "He [Oscar] creates a bridge for us to communicate."

Larry says his recovery program is helping him make improvements in his life. He's not only performing better academically, but feels good about learning to live on his own with a group of people committed to living an alcohol-free, healthy lifestyle.

Peter, who was mentioned earlier in this article, also reports an improved attitude since moving into the house. "I'm just a happier person now," he says, stretched out in a cushy chair in the living room. "I have better relationships with people. And I enjoy life more."

The undergraduate, who underwent inpatient treatment at the request of Ms. Willmott, says the experience there

and in the halfway house, afterward, and transformed his life.

Now Peter says he's living in the moment, reading more books, and regaining a passion for life that had faded long ago. He's also less likely to become overwhelmed by his schoolwork like he used to be when he was using drugs. "It's a cliché, I know," he says, smiling, "but I'm taking it one day at a time."

A Long Road


Everyone involved recognizes the temptations that lurk outside the Recovery House. For example, sometimes, when Peter spots someone walking down the street, smoking a cigarette, he dreams about how nice it would be to "chill out and smoke a joint." And occasionally he feels like he's missing out on the "fun," by not being able to party with other students. But then he remembers where that path led him and how it made him feel, and he knows that he's following the path that's best for him, he says.

Dr. Sellers and Ms. Willmott admit that the students are still vulnerable to relapse. Though they live in a safe environment, "You can just see how fragile these young men are," says Ms. Willmott. "So you just want to support them as much as you possibly can."

What lies on the horizon for the Recovery House?

One goal is to "endow a bed" in the facility for students who otherwise couldn't afford to live there, Dr. Sellers says. There is also a plan to offer additional assistance, such as an onsite support group, to residents, through philanthropic funds.

Though there are no plans to open more substance-free residences on campus, Dr. Sellers and Ms. Willmott don't rule it out for the future because the need is evident. For now, however, the primary goal is to make sure Recovery House is a success and that the students' experiences are as positive as possible.

So far, the house *has* been a success, they say, with all of the slots filled except for one. Little by little, the Recovery House is making a name for itself, says Ms. Willmott, who recently received a call from a family interested in sending their child to Case in part because of the new substance-free facility. 

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