

ADDICTION

TOOLS FOR CLINICAL EXCELLENCE

PROFESSIONAL

Grappling with recovery

Young men at a Connecticut center gain life skills through mixed martial arts (p. 8)

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in pain management (p. 14)

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Sober living with a kick

An extended care center immerses young men in life experiences

Amid a pounding beat in the close quarters of a storefront fitness studio, a dozen young men pair off to practice the moves and holds of mixed martial arts (MMA). The students are engaging in serious competition, but supportive words from the instructor keep the tone friendly. On this fall afternoon, some students will leave with scrapes to show for their effort, but the real takeaways from this class aren't about drawing blood, mastering a takedown, or subduing a combatant.

These young men share one common adversary: addiction. And it is through use of MMA and other activities popular in this age group that an innovative extended care program in Connecticut has delivered a hard body blow to typical expectations about sober living.

From their arrival in the program after a primary treatment stay, the young men residing at Turning Point in New Haven attend a weekly MMA class supplemented by sparring sessions at a local gym. The writing on the wall of the studio they visit every Thursday reads "Team Challenge." If this squad wore team colors, they probably would be dressed in camouflage, because hidden behind the enjoyment of a sport that captivates the young male demographic is the attainment of life skills that will help promote their long-term recovery.



“In MMA you have to identify a threat and neutralize it,” says Al Samaras, vice president of Turning Point Foundation. “Sometimes you experience two or three threats at once,” just as one does during everyday life in recovery.

“This is not about learning how to throw a left hook,” adds Samaras. “It’s about managing your anxiety, your fears.”

You won’t easily find an MMA program in treatment or recovery organizations serving young men; Samaras says most administrators like the concept but can’t get beyond their liability concerns. You also won’t find a fully equipped music studio in many programs, but Turning Point integrates that activity into its program as well. MMA and music, respectively, were instrumental in the recovery journeys of Samaras and of Turning Point founder and president David Vieau. The activities are but two possible pursuits that can help a young person build a network of sober friends.

“A guy will often ask, ‘What am I going to do if I don’t drink?’” says Vieau. “I say, ‘Everything else.’”

Program transformation

Turning Point was established in 2003, but the program looks much different today from its beginnings. Vieau says he ran the program much like a traditional sober-living site at first, but as the average age of the client population decreased, it became clear that a program offering little more than a roof over one’s head was destined to fall short.

“Originally we were just the housing,” Vieau recalls. “What I found was that about 15 percent of the clients made it with little oversight if they had to do everything on their own,” from finding a job to establishing a sober social network.

A new direction became clear to the Harvard-educated Vieau when one young man had to return to Turning Point for a third stay. Committed to the success of this person’s recovery, Vieau decided the third time around to step in and do all the things he had originally expected the young man and all the other residents to handle themselves. He was asking this of residents who were barely removed from adolescence and were just emerging from the controlled environment of a treatment center.





As Samaras puts it, “After four weekends clean, you’re told to get a job, get a sponsor, get an apartment, your girlfriend just broke up with you, and oh, don’t get high.”

From this realization was born a service model that Turning Point refers to as “phased reintegration,” generally unfolding over a one-year period. The first of three phases resembles an extension of the young man’s primary treatment experience (residents range in age from 18 to 24). The residents have regular meetings with a therapist at this point and attend a couple of groups each day, but they also are immediately integrated into gym visits and other recreational activities. That can serve as the hook to keep the young men engaged, or the camouflage to the meaningful work that’s actually happening through these activities.

Phase 2 still has aspects of an orientation, with the residents still living in the restored Victorian mansion that houses up to 18 individuals. But here the young men start taking the steps that will facilitate the move to the next phase, from landing a job or volunteer activity to



Turning Point president David Vieau



Turning Point vice president Al Samaras



establishing linkages with New Haven's active recovery community.

For example, once the resident receives cell phone privileges, he is required to collect the names of at least 15 sober contacts whom he can access when needed.

Before entering Phase 3, the resident meets with an accountant to formulate a budget. The individual relocates from the sober residence to an apartment setting where he lives with other Turning Point clients. Costs in the private-pay program drop considerably in Phase 3,

and the young men now likely are earning some income that will make them less dependent on their parents for support.

"We expose the young man to the anxieties and fears as he exhibits the ability to manage them," Samaras says in explaining the phased reintegration concept.

And as Vieau says of the typical client in the later stages of the program, "When he doesn't want to go, he's ready." Many of the young people stay in the New Haven area and take advantage of its strong network of sober individuals and activities.

Turning Point staff sometimes have to work with family members to adjust their expectations about their loved one's life in recovery—the young man might not be going back to the college he attended when he started drinking or using heavily. In fact, he might have set out on a completely different path.

"We hear, 'When he comes home,' and we say, 'He *doesn't* come home; he's an adult,'" Vieau says.

Bonding opportunity

Former Turning Point resident Dan Cahill speaks with a confidence and maturity that belie his 21 years. He now has seen the program's approach from two perspectives, as Turning Point proceeded to hire him for its staff after he completed the program. He believes activities such as MMA and music fulfill multiple needs. They leave little idle time for negative thoughts to take over, and they serve as a vehicle for bonding among the residents.

"The people you're here with have your back," says Cahill. "The people I went through the program with, these are some of my best friends now."

The music studio offered a particular attraction for Cahill, who started playing drums at age 11. Conversely, MMA was new to him: He had watched a few bouts but didn't know much else about the sport. Now he goes to training sessions weekly, and he's far removed from a time when he was in detox and carried less than 150 pounds on a 6-foot-plus frame.

Vieau and Samaras see both music and MMA as reinforcing a productive group experience. Music offers an excellent opportunity to express emotion, but in a group the musician has to give more and take less in order to stay in harmony, Vieau says. In MMA, the athlete must slow the mind and make sense of potential chaos swirling around him, Samaras says. The MMA training focuses more on cooperative learning than winning, and the experiences translate to challenges the recovering person will face in society.

"Liam" is a current resident with a fervent interest in MMA, to the point where he eventually would like to enter competitions. "This was one of the only reasons I came here," the 19-year-old says in reference to the MMA classes. At the



time of the holidays, Liam had entered Phase 3 at Turning Point but was careful not to think too far ahead.

“I had a six-year drug run, and it’s going to take a solid six years to get out,” he says. “Hobbies are what’s going to keep me sober. If I’m sitting around at home not being active and getting away from people, I won’t be keeping out of my own head.”

Liam now sees MMA training as yielding both physical and mental benefits. “Your focus has to be so strong,” he says, in trying to execute a series of coordinated movements in order to stay out of harm’s way. He also gets to play a coaching role of sorts during the classes.

“If somebody doesn’t understand something in the class, I try to help as much as possible,” he says. “It’s more a family here than anything.”

Program’s reputation

Turning Point had a somewhat rocky beginning, as Vieau found himself embroiled in a siting dispute with New Haven officials (he eventually would prevail in court). In recent years the organization has attained a strong reputation that has led to multiple aftercare referrals from a number of prominent treatment centers around the country, such as Mountainside, Caron Treatment Centers, Hazelden and Gosnold.

Turning Point now employs about 25 staff members, operating four residential settings overall with 63 beds. The organization is in the process of undergoing another transformation, as it is moving to add a new business unit called CT Clinical Services that will employ its present “consulting” therapists and allow residents to utilize their insurance benefits for the required therapy sessions. Samaras believes the change will free the organization to pay sole attention to its programming.

Otherwise, not much at Turning Point is expected to change. Its leaders believe they have found a formula for offering young men a needed bridge between primary treatment and an independent life in the community.

“We look at treatment as almost like college,” says Samaras. “Turning Point is really the first entry-level job.” ■



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