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Bound for home

Ex-inmates find hope at Almost Home

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Daniel Rodriguez, a former inmate, was paroled to the Almost Home program in July. (ED COLLIER)

The lives of Daniel Rodriguez and Ricky Rivera are not exactly the stuff of "Leave It to Beaver."

By age 10 both had begun smoking marijuana. Harder drugs soon followed, and so did weapons and multiple jail stints for Mr. Rivera, a Worcester resident, and Mr. Rodriguez, who used to live in Fitchburg.

Now, a program called Almost Home has four months to do something about it. Considering the odds, that's an ambitious goal.

But if intensity and a desire to change count for anything, the odds begin to improve for the two men.

Founded in January 2006, Almost Home rotates 12 former inmates with histories of substance abuse through its social rehabilitation program every 16 weeks. It is located in the former sheriff's residence on the grounds of the Worcester County House of Correction in West Boylston and operated by Dismas House, a nonprofit agency that provides transitional housing and services to former prisoners.

During the 2004 election campaign that brought him into the sheriff's office, Guy W. Glodis envisioned a program to do something about the roughly 65 percent rate at which ex-prisoners across the country have been returning to jail at an annual cost in Worcester County of \$35,000 per prisoner.

What resulted is a residential social rehabilitation program that requires

members to address their histories of substance abuse. The program has an annual cost of \$7,750 per participant. They attend group and individual counseling at the program and elsewhere, contribute to house meetings, do chores and volunteer their time to community service.

Of 43 former inmates who have graduated from Almost Home, only four have committed new crimes and four have violated their parole, said jail spokesman Keith Mitchell. That's an 81 percent success rate, he said.

The program has a lot of life history to overcome in its enrollees.

Mr. Rodriguez, whose muscular upper right arm sports a large tattoo of a man with a pistol in one hand and a pit bull straining at the leash in the other, got off to a rough start.

Born in Boston, Mr. Rodriguez knew about drugs early on, he said, because his mother and stepfather, who he said was a corrupt Boston police officer, brought illegal drugs into the house when he was a child. He was 4 when his mother took him to Puerto Rico, where he and his 10-year-old sister roamed the streets after she abandoned them.

At times they lived with their uncle, and saw their mother a couple of times a month. Mr. Rodriguez said he saw her overdose on drugs twice. It was in Puerto Rico, he said, that he also was sexually abused by a boy 9 years older than he.

Mr. Rodriguez never did drugs in Puerto Rico, he said, but he held heroin for his best friend's father, who sold the narcotic.

When his grandmother found the drugs he was holding, Mr. Rodriguez was shipped off to an aunt's home in Fitchburg. He was 10 years old. She and his uncle pretty much grounded him in Fitchburg because of his indiscretion in Puerto Rico. Then one day his Fitchburg uncle was pulled over by the police on a motor-vehicle violation, and the uncle had the boy hold two bundles of heroin while the police wrote him up on the traffic violation.

That pretty much ended his being grounded. The 10-year-old began selling marijuana even before he used it, though that came soon after, and then cocaine by age 11 at parties he attended with people in their upper teens and even in their 30s and 40s. Since then he's done Ecstasy, mushrooms, mescaline, LSD and heroin.

He's been in and out of jail over the years. Most recently Mr. Rodriguez, 27, did 14 months of a two and a half year sentence for holding up the Li'l Peach

Grocerette in Leominster, on the Fitchburg line.

But what Mr. Rodriguez calls the best thing to happen in his life occurred in March, when he got into the sheriff's Substance Treatment Opportunity Program, an in-house substance-abuse program for inmates. He got in even though he said that he admitted to smoking pot in jail. The 6-foot-2-inch ponytailed man said he got counseling in STOP that made him realize "all of the things I'm doing is from when I got molested."

He said, "My life was to get high and to chase that high." He said he "was looking at life through foggy glasses. My life was unmanageable."

Mr. Rodriguez was paroled in July to Almost Home, and he calls it the first positive thing he's done in his life. He attends Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in Worcester and Clinton seven days a week and has a sponsor. He volunteers once a week at the Many Hands organic farm in Barre and gets group and individual counseling at Almost Home, as well as counseling at the Rape Crisis Center and Spectrum Health Systems in Worcester.

Program members have a bank of computers at Almost Home and a GED program available to them.

Most valuable of all, Mr. Rodriguez said, "is having people who care about what I'm doing in life," including Almost Home program director Meridith Milesi and the rest of the staff.

Mr. Rodriguez knows that he's anything but home-free on his substance-abuse problems. He got married while he was in jail, and his wife, who is dealing with her own substance abuse and health problems, is unhappy he's not home with her now that he's out of jail.

Mr. Rodriguez recently went to see his wife in Leominster on a four-hour pass. But it was "where I did drugs. I felt uncomfortable, being the addict that I am."

He said, "I heard my disease talking to me: 'Why don't you go outside and smoke a cigarette and see who you see.'"

"I'm worried. I'm human. I don't feel safe to go back home. I can't do it on my own."

At the end of his four months at Almost Home, Mr. Rodriguez hopes to live at either Dismas House or Catholic Charities' Crozier House - programs that

could help him continue his recovery and become independent.

Eventually he hopes that he and his wife will live someplace warm, someplace that isn't Leominster or Fitchburg.

Mr. Rivera has already been in jail twice and in juvenile detention anywhere from five to eight times - he can't remember the exact number - and he's only 19. He was sentenced in January to two and a half years in jail, with 18 months to be served, for possession of cocaine and marijuana with intent to distribute and on firearms charges. Both his brothers are in jail.

Mr. Rivera, who has a 4-month-old daughter, said that initially he did not want to accept the parole he was offered. "I knew if I went to my mother's house I'd start my old ways again" and that would mean a stiffer sentence next time. But he sees parole to the Almost Home program he's in now as a key to turning his life around, especially if he can get into Dismas House upon graduation.

"I never had a job before," Mr. Rivera said, but the volunteer work at the farm in Barre makes him want to become a landscaper.

Almost Home "helps me with my criminal thinking," he said. He is used to "arguing with people, fighting with people, thinking about hurting others.

"Just to have something to do," he said he enjoyed "pushing them around, saying stupid things to them to get them mad" so they might give him an excuse to hurt them. "I'd be doing it again if I never came here."

Mr. Rivera said he wishes there were more programming - such as two anger-management sessions a week instead of one - more meetings and counseling. He said he admires Mr. Rodriguez's progress, and Mr. Rivera said he is working on his reluctance to talk to people so he can secure a sponsor at a 12-step meeting for himself.

Noting that he is the youngest person in Almost Home, Mr. Rivera said two new people are about to join the program, and "I want to set a good example for them."

Colleen Hilferty, co-executive director of Dismas House, said her hope is that Almost Home can "plant a seed" to help its residents, realizing that four months is not enough to complete the reversal of damage from an entire dysfunctional life. Wholesale changes are needed to overturn the criminal and addictive thinking that has taken over the lives of inmates.

Ms. Milesi said the program works on "trust issues" because the lack of trustworthy role models in ex-prisoners' lives leads them to lie and avoid unpleasant truths. For those who are able to "think this is my opportunity to change my life," the Almost Home staff makes the effort of "not giving up on them and putting up with a certain amount of" stuff "from them," she said.

But that does not include allowing them to use drugs or alcohol, she said.

Volunteers - college students, church groups, and others - regularly come to the program to make meals and mix with enrollees to show that people care about them, Ms. Hilferty said. It's clear how much that means to the members, Ms. Milesi said.

She recalled that one former Almost Home member who stormed out of a difficult relationship left all his belongings behind except for the blanket made and prayed over by members of St. Luke's Church in Westboro, which gives a blanket to each graduate of the program.

The 13 full- and part-time staff members of the \$279,000 program, funded by the state parole board, the state Public Health and Correction departments and private foundations, provide everything from house meetings to one-on-one unscheduled attention "all in a family setting" where "there's love but there's expectations," Ms. Hilferty said.

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