

HOPE, AND HARD WORK



TROSA's recovery program celebrates 15 years of success

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DURHAM -- When Kevin McDonald came to Durham in 1994, he thought he had found heaven.

Since then, he has tried to deliver people from hell -- the hell of drug abuse and ruined lives.

As president and CEO of TROSA, he has worked to provide "one-stop shopping" for those on the edge of darkness by offering a comprehensive, long-term drug recovery program. In 15 years, the program has served more than 4,000 people. It demands a lot, but it gives plenty in return -- a place to live, learn and get healthy, all without charge.

McDonald founded TROSA in 1994 after he moved to Durham from California. He said he loved Durham instantly, because of the community atmosphere and the likelihood that he could make a difference in the lives of people in deep trouble.

Starting with just \$18,000, he has built TROSA into a program with a \$10 million annual budget, much of which comes from money generated by businesses TROSA runs to help residents learn a trade. For example, TROSA has a furniture-moving company with 100 vehicles, a lawn care business, picture framing shop and used furniture store.

"So, in the moving company, people learn how to move furniture, how to drive trucks and then

they can get a commercial driver's license," he said.

The goal: When residents complete the two-year recovery program, they'll be prepared for a job in the real world.

That approach seems to be working. A recent TROSA study showed only 8 percent of its graduates return to drug use a year after they have graduated. "The national statistics for that are about 40 to 60 percent," McDonald said.

The study also showed that those in trouble with the law who opted for the program instead of prison had a similarly low recidivism rate, saving thousands of tax dollars.

TROSA has a staff of 50 and about 350 residents, many at its main, 13-acre residential and training campus at 1820 James St. The rest are at residential locations throughout the city.

No one is charged a penny. "We provide all their clothing, their sundries, everything they need," he said.

What TROSA does require is a strong desire for residents to change their lives.

Most residents have struggled with drugs or alcohol for more than 10 years. Nearly 93 percent have a criminal record, and about one in three comes to TROSA as an alternative to prison.

More than 35 percent are homeless when they arrive, and some have serious physical and mental health problems. Some don't read and write, and nearly half left high school without graduating.

But at TROSA, they find a world of hope and hard work.

"The work ethic is really important, because a lot of people who come here have never had a work ethic in their life," McDonald said. "Everything in TROSA is holistic, and residents are empowered to do different jobs here."

"It's a very strict program, but it's very comprehensive," he said. "One of our rules is no violence or threats of violence, and no drugs or alcohol."

In the past 15 years, he said, there have been just 14 incidents of violence at TROSA. "The worst has been a punch," he said.

Volunteer resident psychiatrists from Duke University have given their services for the past eight years. "We treat not just the drug abuse, but the underlying mental illness," he said.

Others may have HIV infections, high blood pressure and other physical ailments. The program has a small clinic and a nurse practitioner on site, and Duke doctors provide free services on Wednesday nights.

Residents also improve their education, from learning to read and write to preparing for college

and learning job application skills.

"So you're dealing with a lot of issues, and here it's one-stop shopping," McDonald said. He believes that comprehensive approach and offering a two-year program instead of 60 or 90 days has been a major reason for TROSA's success.

As the program marks its 15th year, McDonald is looking to the future with optimism.

"I'm proud to be in Durham," he said. "I came from a gang program in central Los Angeles and I knew I'd come to heaven when I came to Durham in 1994, because it's a community, and it's a small enough community that you can help make a difference."

"Our goal for the future is to get better, and to help more people and continue being a valuable player in Durham."