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Addicts seek solace in Delray Beach

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BY AUDRA D.S. BURCH
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D ELRAY BEACH -- Most everybody in this neighborhood coffee haunt has been hooked on something. The high school dropout with beauty-pageant looks has been fending off a heroin habit for two decades. The former football player says he is clean now after years of popping pain pills. Santa Claus succumbed to alcohol.



CARL JUSTE / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Adam, 29, from Eugene, Ore., sits alone as he in the courtyard of KoffeeOkee. He is trying to stay sober after getting addicted to heroin.

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Nineteen of the fallen are here tonight for therapy and healing, for a second -- or a third or fourth -- chance, hoping to reclaim a piece of their lives. They form a circle in the pebble garden behind KoffeeOkee, which is owned by Harold and Dawn Jonas, former users who now help others kick drug and alcohol habits and answer the question: *What now?*

A resort on the Atlantic in Palm Beach County, Delray Beach has another, less obvious civic profile: Florida's sobriety capital. Like Hazelden in Minnesota and Utah's Cirque Lodge and the communities that surround them, it is a place to dry out, clean up. Its recovery community is spirited and multilayered, a dense mesh of dozens of treatment facilities, counseling centers and residential housing that gives addicts a wide-reaching chance for recovery and permanent lifestyle change.

This is where people start over. And sometimes stay.

"You want to be here if you are struggling with an addiction," says Anna O'Connell, 43, who has been in and out of detox for crack cocaine, heroin and alcohol over the past 20 years and attends therapy sessions at KoffeeOkee. "This is the closest thing to family; this is where you feel safe."

Treatment for addictions that the medical community now accepts as chronic diseases ranges from private \$10,000-a-month treatment centers to free coffee, counseling and karaoke at java houses such as this one, which hosts formal therapy sessions twice a week and informal gatherings even more often.

MANY, FROM ALL OVER

The size of South Florida's recovery community is difficult to estimate because only one layer -- facilities with residential treatment beds -- is licensed by the state. Delray Beach alone offers more than 1,200 beds in transitional houses -- a second layer -- according to the South County Recovery Residence Association in Delray, which monitors halfway residences.

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Every week in Delray, about 5,000 addicts attend 12-step meetings that stretch from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. At Crossroads Club, a squat stucco complex off Lake Ida Road, about 700 people walk through the doors every day to attend 120 meetings aimed at a swath of needs, from treatment for cocaine addiction to obsessive cluttering, says Susan Miller, executive director, a recovering alcoholic.

Addicts arrive from as far away as Oregon and Rhode Island and from as nearby as South Beach. They face daunting odds: Relapse rates range from 40 to 90 percent, depending on the client's dedication and will power, sustained treatment, and follow-up care, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

"My parents sent me here to try to turn my life around," Rani Canosa, 21, a pretty, petite college dropout offers one Monday night at KoffeeOkee. "Alcohol made me feel good. I would be really, really happy, then really, really sad, then just miserable."

Canosa, from a Baltimore suburb, started drinking seriously as an 18-year-old freshman in college. Soon she could consume a 12-pack of beer and a half-bottle of vodka in a two-hour stretch.

She had tried treatment centers in Maryland and Pennsylvania but returned home only to relapse once she was back among friends and familiar haunts.

Canosa has been in Delray Beach since Aug. 29, out of treatment at the Wellness Resource Center in nearby Boca Raton since Feb. 5. She lives in a halfway house and works as a barista at KoffeeOkee.

"The truth is, if I was home, I would be drunk or looking to get drunk," she says softly, never making eye contact. "I actually *want* to be here."

COLLECTIVE STRUGGLE

But what distinguishes this vibrant recovery community from similar places elsewhere, is a growing sober social infrastructure, an informal network of places for people to mingle without the colossal temptations of drugs and alcohol.

"Delray Beach is a microcosm of the various layers of the recovery process," says Howard Lerner, clinical director of the Addiction Treatment Program at South Miami Hospital. "Those struggling belong to a fraternity."

Here, even in the midst of fighting for sobriety, addicts can go dancing at popular clubs that hold sober nights, sing karaoke at a sober coffee house, listen to live music at a sober juke joint, call in to recovery radio shows, roar into the sunset with a sober motorcycle club and pray at a Bible study just for them.

"The struggle with an addiction can be forever," says Harold Jonas, a mental health counselor. "So all we really want is for people to be healthy and to laugh and have hope and be part of the world, not just the recovery community."

The collective sobriety struggle here is no longer anonymous. Recovering addicts live among "normies" and often work on Atlantic Avenue, the city's glittering ribbon of sidewalk cafes and boutiques and galleries.

"When you are on this journey, it's incredibly important to feel like you are not alone, to see and be around people just like you," says nattily-dressed Jonah Yolman, now 22 months on the clean side of a wicked crack-cocaine addiction.

Yolman, 29, sitting in a Starbucks on Atlantic Avenue, quietly acknowledges two people ordering coffee who are in one of the dozens of 12-step anonymous programs. He talks casually about the familiar identifying signs of people in recovery: the relentless smoking and coffee drinking, the trails of cigarette butts and empty coffee cups and candy wrappers. And the most obvious sign: people tightly clutching books with dark covers, their 12-step guides.

"We are everywhere, living and working in this city," says Yolman, a counselor at a local treatment facility who promotes two sober nights at area clubs. He and a partner are also launching a similar sober club night in August at a South Beach club (sobernightlife.com).

"People come here and enjoy the weather, the beaches, low-key atmosphere and try to start over."

NATIONAL REPUTATION

In some ways, Delray's recovery community draws its inspiration from a small, rural town in Minnesota that over the years became a magnet for recovering addicts, from marquee rock stars like Eric Clapton to the anonymous souls who came looking for peace and order.

Since 1949, addicts have famously flocked to Hazelden, which started as a farmhouse retreat in Center City for men working their way through programs based on the 12-step principles.

Over the years, teams of doctors, counselors and chaplains developed a holistic approach to rehab now emulated worldwide.

More than three decades ago, Delray's first sober houses opened for people making the transition from residential care to independent living. The houses -- a yellow clapboard with a sweeping porch on one street, a peach bungalow with a white-picket fence on another -- are sprinkled within neighborhoods, around public squares, near churches.

Rents range from \$125 to \$175 weekly for a room and access to kitchens and family areas. Most landlords require random drug tests, and some perform bed checks or monitor whether their clients have reported to work.

Two years ago, Crossroads Centre in Antigua, a drug-treatment program founded by Eric Clapton, opened in the city. And in February, Lecreshia Hall, a Boca Raton psychiatrist, started Hallway of Life Recovery Center, a faith-based, 28-bed transitional facility for women, on a quiet residential street near downtown.

"When I did the research to find the best place to open, Delray Beach kept coming up," says Hall, who leads Bible study on Tuesdays. "The idea of our center is to teach our clients how they can use the Bible to help in recovery."

But Delray Beach's national reputation as a recovery community has been unsettling for

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some residents.

"We don't mind taking care of the people living here, but we don't particularly like people coming from all over the country or the world to recover," says City Manager David Harden. "But it's a fact of life, and so we have tried to be supportive of the community."

Harden says Delray Beach gives money each year to the Drug Abuse Foundation of Palm Beach County, the county's oldest chemical-dependency treatment and prevention center. The Commission also sold city property to Crossroads Club several years ago, allowing the center to expand.

Over the years, residents have complained to city officials about the lack of security and control at some sober houses. Owners need only a landlord permit to run them, a reality that makes strict regulation difficult.

Jonas, who heads the South County association and runs the coffee shop, says problems stem mostly from unscrupulous landlords who hope to turn quick profits at the expense of fragile tenants and the surrounding neighborhood.

"You got some of these operators who don't manage the property or the tenants, then they put the people out and leave them homeless," Jonas says. "There are some operators we would all be better off without."

FINDING SOLACE

Jonas came to Florida 20 years ago full of reasons to give up. But with the help of his father, who put him in a West Palm Beach treatment center, he cleaned up and stayed put.

A slight guy with a thick mustache and a thicker Philadelphia accent, Jonas sits in the lounge of his coffee shop one afternoon rattling off his story with sobriety's detachment and confidence.

Pot by 13. Then acid and speed and cocaine. Graduation to alcohol. Bottomed out in the injection world of cocaine and heroin.

Jonas entered rehab in 1987. He married Dawn, a recovering cocaine addict (they met in a 12-step group), and went back to school, earning an online master's degree in counseling psychology from Antioch University and a doctorate in addiction studies from International University in St. Kitts.

"You come out of a situation like that broken and with very little to hold on to," Jonas says. "You come out of treatment and you say, 'Now what?'"

So Jonas and his wife -- who recently celebrated her 22nd clean year -- began working to answer this huge question, working to help define what life after treatment really means.

In 2000, they launched sober.com, a Web clearinghouse for 30,000 recovery programs nationwide. And for 10 years, he operated a recovery residence in Delray Beach. She runs a home for women in recovery.

Two years ago, they opened KoffeeOkee, in many ways ground zero for the recovery community. Inside is a cozy mix of velvet wingback chairs and bistro tables and a small cafe offering every coffee, tea and juice imaginable but absolutely no alcohol. The walls are covered with bulletin boards offering testimonials, treatment and housing ads, and calendars outlining the month's sober activities.

A piano sits in the corner with a dried white rose on top, a delicate memorial to Valerie, a drug counselor who died a year ago.

Of an overdose.

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