

Addicts Respond to Friendship

Amity: Simple plan works for inmate drug program.

By D.C. SPENCER

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PORTERVILLE - Amity is something that most people take for granted - unless, of course, they don't have it.

It is that condition where one person cares about and listens to another. It promotes a sense of well-being, belonging, accountability.

Most of us recognize amity by its common name of friendship, but some never know what it feels like.

Rod Mullen believes this simple, priceless, yet often missing commodity can make the difference between failure and success in treating incarcerated drug addicts. And as chief executive officer and founder of the Amity Foundation of California, he has put his beliefs into practice.

Amity's administrative headquarters relocated to Porterville at 601 S. Main St. three years ago. Unnoticed by most passersby, the office is centrally located from its prison-based programs and employs six people. Across the state, Amity has 94 staff members.

Amity's successful approach to in-prison drug treatment is credited with generating enough confidence in the Legislature that it has appropriated over \$100 million to fund 9,000 drug treatment beds in California prisons based on the Amity model, according to former California Department of Corrections Director James Gomez.

"It could have only come about through Amity's work," Gomez said. "It is clear that Amity results have

shifted the public debate here in California about corrections to a more treatment-oriented approach." Mullen and Amity board member Naya Arbiter answered the CDC's challenge in the late 1980s to produce a prototype therapeutic community. In 1990, they opened Amity at the Richard J. Donovan Correctional Facility in San Diego, the state's first in-prison therapeutic community.

They based the project on experience they had with other treatment programs developed for adolescents, probationers and jail populations.

Amity also has therapeutic communities at California State Prison in Los Angeles County, the Correctional Training Facility in Soledad and at Ironwood State Prison in Blythe.

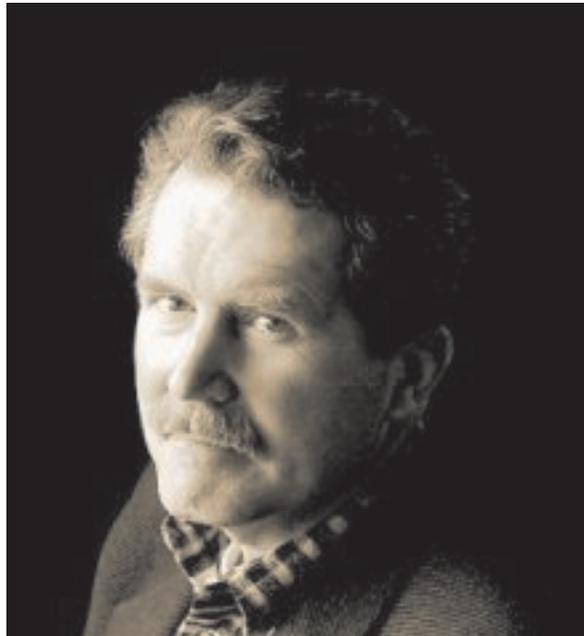
Amity's intensive 24 hours a day, seven days a week approach deals with everything in the addict's life - from speech, dress and thoughts, to job skills and more.

"You can't just deal with addiction," Mullen said in a recent interview. "Everything about the person has to be changed." Initially, therapeutic communities evolved from roots similar

to those of Alcoholics Anonymous, Mullen said. But AA isn't intensive enough for incarcerated addicts returning again and again to prison confines.

Much of Amity's success is attributed to former users who are trained to work alongside staff who counsel participants, Mullen said.

Addicted inmates are more likely to listen to one who has lived where they live and survived, particularly one who will tell them that his worst day now without



recorder photo by john tipton

Rod Mullen, founder of Amity Foundation of California, has a unique approach to the rehabilitation of prisoners. "You can't just deal with addiction," Mullen said. "Everything about the person has to be changed."

drugs is far better than his best day behind bars or strung out.

“The last thing a drug user thinks is a problem is his drug use,” Mullen said. Credibility is key. So is commitment.

“When you walk away from addiction, you walk toward something else,” he said. Amity provides that something else. Recovery involves genuine friendships, those not built on market-based relationships of what you can do for me, he said. It involves intimacy, commitment, making and keeping promises, being there for someone else, genuine concern.

“Addiction is complete isolation. It’s the ultimate in selfishness. Genuine friendship is the polar opposite of that,” he said.

Last year Amity marked its 10-year anniversary at the Richard J. Donovan facility of taking inmates “from number to name to dignity.”

The State Legislature recognized Amity with a resolution noting “extraordinary recidivism reduction rates ... with more than 50 percent of its clients remaining crime-free 24 months after release from its therapeutic community and aftercare programs and more than 40 percent at 12 months post-parole.”

State Attorney General Bill Lockyer also commended Amity for reducing the number of repeat offenders.

“It should also be noted that this program has resulted in economic savings to California taxpayers who no longer have to fund the incarceration of such repeat offenders,” he said in a congratulatory letter to Amity.

Mullen said the programs inspired by Amity can save California taxpayers as much as \$80 million a year by decreasing the recidivism rate.

The cost of Amity in-prison and aftercare is about \$12,700 per inmate.

Cost of reincarceration for five months is \$9,400; for 20 months, \$35,700; and for 55 months, \$98,400. A third-strike offender costs the

state \$386,000 for 18 years,

according to figures provided by Amity.

Since over 50% of those participating in Amity’s prison therapeutic communities are 3rd strike candidates, turning around even a few can result in huge savings for the state’s taxpayers, says Mullen.

