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Men get second chance at Vista ranch

By: STACY BRANDT - Staff Writer

VISTA ---- Before starting a therapeutic drug program in early 2004, 45-year-old Mark Coleman said, he had never been sober or out of jail for more than six months.

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Arts & Entertainment Magazine

Now Coleman is celebrating his sobriety and freedom by helping others follow the same path at the Amity Vista Continuance Ranch in the Shadowridge area.

The ranch offers a residential rehabilitation program for convicted felons, helping parolees end the behavior that landed them behind bars.

After six months in the program, Coleman was hired as a counselor at the ranch, and he is now attending classes at Palomar College. Less than two years earlier, he was serving his sixth prison sentence for drug-related offenses.

News Update

"I'm one of their Amity miracles," he said last week, as he relaxed at the serene, 5-acre ranch on one of his days off.

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The program

The Amity Foundation, which started in 1969 in Tucson, Ariz., to combat drug abuse, came to California 11 years ago with a 200-bed project in RJ Donovan state prison in south San Diego

County. It has spread to other state prisons and now can serve as many as 9,000 inmates in five prisons across the state.

The foundation operates facilities in Albuquerque, N.M., and Tucson as well as two in California -- one in Los Angeles and the 50-bed ranch that opened in Vista in 1993.

Prisoners begin the program while they're still incarcerated, then must choose whether to continue the program at one of the residential centers when they are released.

The state pays about \$72 a day for each man at the ranch, which comes out to about \$13,000 for a six-month program, said Shawna Smith, who manages Amity ranch.

In comparison, it costs about \$15,000 to house an inmate in the state prison system for the same amount of time, according to the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

Three years after completing the post-prison program, people are less likely to return to a life of crime, officials said.

"You can take guys that didn't know how to make it in society and make them productive," Coleman said.

Roughly 27.4 percent of the people who completed Amity's in-prison and after-care treatment returned to prison within three years after their release, compared with a recidivism rate of 75.1 percent for people who didn't go through the program, according to a 1998 study.

Intensive therapy

On a typical day, residents at the Vista facility participate in eight hours of classes and counseling. They usually work on the ranch for about four hours a day, with duties including cooking, cleaning and routine maintenance.

"We let them do the decorating, but we have to help them a little on that," Smith said with a laugh.

In the evenings and on weekends, they have free time to pursue hobbies or watch movies.

Nobody is allowed to leave the ranch after 7 p.m. During the day, they are not allowed to go anywhere alone.

After four months, they're allowed to begin working outside the facility.

Many of the people who finish the program go on to work for the Amity Foundation.

In fact, everybody working at the ranch in Vista has been through the program.

The ultimate goal is to teach former inmates to live in mainstream society, said 45-year-old Smith, who started working for the foundation after graduating in 1994 from a facility in Arizona.

"We give them the opportunity to see what normal life is like," she said. "It gives people back their dignity, engenders hope for people who previously never had hope, and it makes the larger community safer."

Coleman said that just as his life as changed, he was excited to see others turn things around at the ranch.

"I enjoy seeing the guys evolve like a caterpillar grows into a butterfly," he said.

Chip Smith, 46, is one of those apparent transformations.

Just six months after finishing a three-year prison sentence, Smith said, he is working as a carpenter and is again a part of his 7-year-old son's life.

The experience has given him not only a fresh start with his life but also friends and piece of mind, he said.

"I'm not alone," he said at the ranch shortly after returning from his job. "If I ever have any problems, I have a group of friends now."

Good neighbors

Though residents at the ranch occasionally have had difficulty adjusting to life out of prison, problems with the nearby community are rare and usually very minor, Shawna Smith said.

Most of these instances stem from public misconceptions about the often heavily tattooed men living at the ranch, she said.

"Some people think, 'Once a drug addict, always a drug addict,' " she said.

The area hasn't seen an increase in crime because of the facility, sheriff's Sgt. Roy Castaneda said.

Sheriff's deputies sometimes come to the ranch to visit, Shawna Smith said, but because the residents are closely monitored by their peers and work directly with parole agents, they have little contact with deputies.

Most people who live nearby don't even realize the facility is there, said Carol Rambo, manager of Shadowridge Village Apartments, a large complex next to the ranch at the end of Watson Avenue, south of Shadowridge Drive.

"They are trying to be part of the community and to let people know they're not bad guys," she said.

Every Halloween for the last several years, residents at the facility have organized a "haunted trail" for nearby residents. This year, about 200 children walked the decorated spooky path.

"I think the more we do with the larger community, the better light we're seen in," Shawna Smith said.

Though there have been occasional problems, Smith said that on the whole, the facility helps make the community safer.

Anthony Bowden, a councilor at the ranch, agreed.

"If we don't have programs like this, you're going to continue to have crime, you're going to continue to have prisons full," he said.

Bowden, now 40, says he left a life of gangs, drugs and violence five years ago to join the program and is now working toward an associate degree in psychology at Palomar College.

He said he enjoys helping others turn their lives around the way he has.

"What goes on here is a lot of magic," Bowden said.

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