



Santa Cruz Residential Recovery residents meet for their morning group Friday.

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

# County's largest nonprofit celebrates 35 years

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Joel Irons first tried meth when he was 13 and the highly addictive drug gave him an adrenaline rush like nothing he had ever felt.

He stayed hooked on meth, smoking the drug daily and letting it consume his life, for about 10 years.

"I'm an addict. You name it, I was addicted to it, but meth was my drug of choice," Irons, 27, said. When on meth, "I had all this energy. My mind was racing and I was up, up, up."

Irons rode the ups and downs that come with methamphetamine — staying awake for days on end followed by extreme depression and sleep — until five years ago when he checked into Santa Cruz Residential Recovery, a Victorian house on Rigg Street for drug addicts and alcoholics.

"You have to reach out for help, you have to speak up," said Irons, who graduated from

residential recovery in 2003 and has gone on to become a drug and alcohol counselor for the program. "You have to say, 'I've had enough of this'."

Santa Cruz Residential Recovery is one of several dozen services provided by Santa Cruz County Community Counseling Center, the county's largest yet little-known nonprofit agency.

The counseling center — with a \$25 million annual budget, 57 facilities and 350 employees — is celebrating its 35th anniversary in April.

The counseling center survives on local, state and federal funds, private donations and client fees. An estimated 6,000 people across Santa Cruz County use the services each year, according to Executive Director Carolyn Coleman.

Those services include:

■ Head Start — an early education program for low-income children.

■ River Street Homeless Shelter — a 32-bed homeless shelter.

■ Papas — A state research proj-

ect to encourage the role of fathers in the lives of their children.

■ Tyler House — a substance abuse program for teens.

The agency is also involved in several affordable housing projects and mental health services.

"They do so much for the people in Santa Cruz County who need help in a whole variety of ways," said county Supervisor Ellen Pirie.

Name recognition has been an ongoing struggle for the agency. Most people are familiar with individual programs such as Head Start and the YES School, but few are aware of the role played by the counseling center.

The counseling center acts as the parent organization overseeing four divisions: community recovery, child and family development, community support and youth services. The four divisions oversee the dozens of individual programs.

"We've been talking about this for a long time — how to get that brand recognition," said Peter Gaarn, chair of the counseling

center's board of directors.

Santa Cruz Residential Recovery, formerly called the Sunflower House, is one of the original programs started by the counseling center in 1973.

For people like Sofora Kreloff, who had a problem with prescription pills before getting help, the 30-bed residential rehabilitation program was a lifesaver.

She graduated from the program on Christmas Day 2004 and has stayed around as a regular volunteer.

"I hit rock bottom and lost everything. I had to be stopped," Kreloff said. "It saved my life."

Will the counseling center be around for another 35 years? Community leaders and agency organizers hope so.

"We can respond to the needs of the community quickly as needs arise," said Coleman, who's worked with the counseling center since 1981.

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