

Drugs

Ex-drug addicts savor a new chance at deli ✓

Sunflower House buys deli as 'hedge'

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SERVING GOOD FOOD IN A SQUEAKY-CLEAN environment is the aim of the ex-drug addicts who are being returned to productive careers via the Well Bean Deli in Santa Cruz.

All are in the program at Sunflower House, a local drug rehabilitation center, and various tasks at the Well Bean Deli mark their final steps before re-entry into the world of work.

Several months ago, Sunflower House purchased the restaurant as a hedge against ever-dwindling government financial supports.

"In this day of government cutbacks, we didn't wait for the axe to fall," says Paul O'Brien, Sunflower House director. "And, in addition to supplementing future revenue needs, the deli also serves as a training vehicle for residents as they prepare to re-enter society."

Life at Sunflower House is harsh, O'Brien admits, but those who do make it through the program have a very high success rate.

Part of the harsh discipline is complete maintenance of the house, which means clean, clean, clean. That's why, O'Brien says, there is no problem in keeping the deli squeaky-clean.

The menu is vegetarian, and preparing the food is Frank Machado, an experienced chef and now the deli's head cook and assistant manager.

He tells his story:

"When Sunflower House found me, I was in jail in Santa Cruz for sales of heroin. I was addicted.

"When I first went into the program, I thought I wouldn't make it. I didn't want to make it — I thought I was too far gone.

"But after I had been there a month and a half, around Christmas time, I got to see my wife and children. While I was talking to my wife, she said she saw changes in me that I wasn't aware of.

"That gave me hope."

Machado has now "graduated" from the main

Sunflower House residence, is living in a re-entry house also owned by the program, and plans to be reunited with his family by Christmastime.

"Working here is helping me to get my sense of responsibility back," he says.

Machado's story is typical, according to O'Brien.

"Our first contact with a person usually is in the jail," he says. "The person has been arrested for a drug-specific crime, such as possession, sale, or burglary to support a habit.

"The person usually is bombed out from his family of origin or his wife and kids — and has lost his job. His drug problem is so severe he has lost about everything.

"Our outreach person goes into the jail, talks to the probation officer and public defender and gets the picture of whether or not the person is appropriate for the program. Those with violent, psychotic histories are screened out — so are those who are not mentally or emotionally equipped to handle the program.

"If the judge agrees to let them come, we take them into the program."

O'Brien says about 75 people are seen and most of those enter the program. But many bail out because it is too hard and about 10 a year actually graduate.

Carol Ruegg, deli manager, has managed other restaurants and says she is very impressed by the Sunflower House workers.

"They're more dedicated," she says, "and I've never had discipline problems or problems with stealing. They're always on time, too."

She says they're all proud of their menu, which includes specialties prepared with tofu, tempeh, soymilk and miso.

At present, the deli is open for lunch and dinner from 11:30 a.m. to 7:30 p.m., Monday through Saturday.

Soon, breakfast will be served there, as well, too.

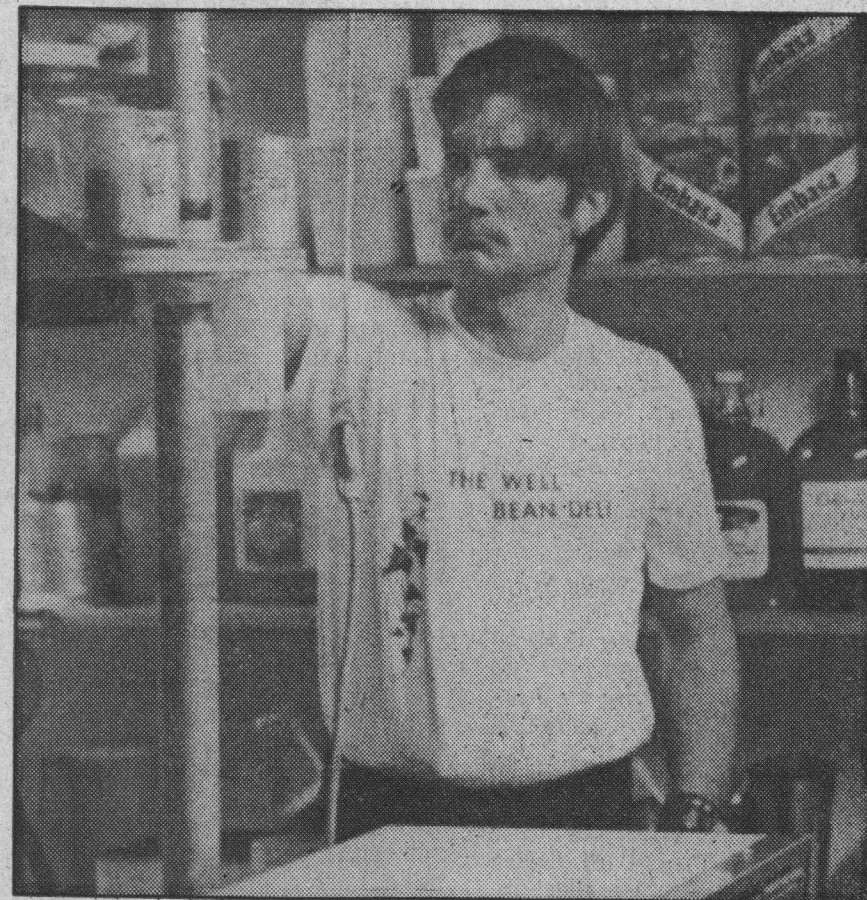
Sunflower House director Paul O'Brien and deli manager Carol Ruegg.



Marcia Parks stands on a ladder to chalk up the day's menu. At right, Bill Law works in the deli kitchen.



Frank Machado and Rebecca Gonzales chop vegetables for the deli's vegetarian fare.



Photos by Pete Amos

