

The Sun Comes Out At Sunflower House

Maybe there should be a sign over the front door saying "All Who Enter Here Make a Commitment."

Those who enter Sunflower House do make a commitment — they promise to stay for two years if it is necessary. The average stay is about 13-14 months.

The young people who enter the portals of the tall old Victorian house at 125 Rigg Street are there for one reason. They are there to rid themselves of the drug habit.

"The problem isn't really drugs — but goes much deeper," comments Bob Kittle, senior counselor for Sunflower House.

"Drugs allow people to run away — to hide their pain and not face reality."

Main goal of Sunflower House is to help people take on the responsibility for their own lives, according to the director, Joe Vitanyi.

It's a resident drug treatment program under the auspices of Santa Cruz Community Counseling Center, and is funded by the National Institute of Drug Abuse, the State Agency of Narcotics and Drug Abuse, revenue sharing, and matching county funds.

There are three counselors, an assistant director and a part-time director in addition to the director.

Young people — the age limit ranges from 18 to the early 20s, and the average age is about 24 — are referred to Sunflower House by the probation department, the parole department, the detoxification center or on self-referral.

There is a subcontract with San Benito County — all beds are full and there is a waiting list. At present the house holds 22 residents. Most of them are from Santa Cruz County.

"Our specific goal is that graduates from Sunflower House will not use drugs

and will not go to jail," says Jennifer Lamano, assistant director.

There are rules that residents must live by — or leave. They include: no alcohol, no drugs, no violence, no threats of violence and no sex between residents.

Sunflower House is run by crews of residents who do everything from cooking and cleaning to operating their own commissary which is stocked with good used clothing as well as food supplies. They cook, following menus planned weekly by a dietitian. A maintenance engineer directs the crew that keeps up house and grounds.

An activities director arranges for outsiders to come and speak on various subjects, during the weekly hour-long sessions devoted to that purpose.

There are regular "rap" sessions and encounter group situations.

Of these last, Counselor Kittle says: "It's hard to live with others for 24 hours a day and hold in feelings. The encounter sessions allow a time for residents to get stuff of their chest — to talk things out."

One of the residents says: "I've started to use them not to blame others but I'm beginning to see what's wrong with me. I'm starting to recognize certain things — it's not easy but it's happening."

That particular resident was probationed to Sunflower House. "I had my choice," she says, "one year in jail or something else. I took the something else."

Some of the residents were into heroin; most were very sick indeed when they came to Sunflower.

New arrivals stay in the house all the time, going out into the garden perhaps, but not leaving the premises for six to nine months. They are not allowed to go downtown. If all goes well, they are allowed to take part-time jobs after a year or so, and may leave to work during the day and return to Sunflower at night

They are encouraged to save the money they make, in order to get another start in the outside world when they are ready to leave Sunflower.

The present program set-up goes back about two years although Sunflower has actually been in existence for about four years. A follow-up of 1975 residents, completed recently for the county board of supervisors, gives an estimate of successes above 50 per cent.

"And those were residents who left early," comments a counselor.

They feel good about results so far and they discuss how to raise the percentage of successes at their rap sessions, realizing that it is going to be a slow, learning process all the way.

"There is one truism here at Sunflower House," says Kittle, "and that's this: the only thing constant here is change."

—MARGARET KOCH



Counselor Jennifer Lamano above, welcomes a newcomer to Sunflower House. Below, rap session by residents and counselors who include, from left: Barbara Miller-Franklin, Jessica Spector and Jennifer again.



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