

Detox — the end or a beginning?

Drug Abuse Center

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SANTA CRUZ — Detox. The end of the line. The place drunks go when they can no longer handle life, with or without alcohol. The last stop on a downhill slide.

But for some, detox is the beginning of a new life.

In Janus Alcoholism Services' detoxification unit, the only one in the north county, some of those who got a chance to begin again sober come back to help others along the same path.

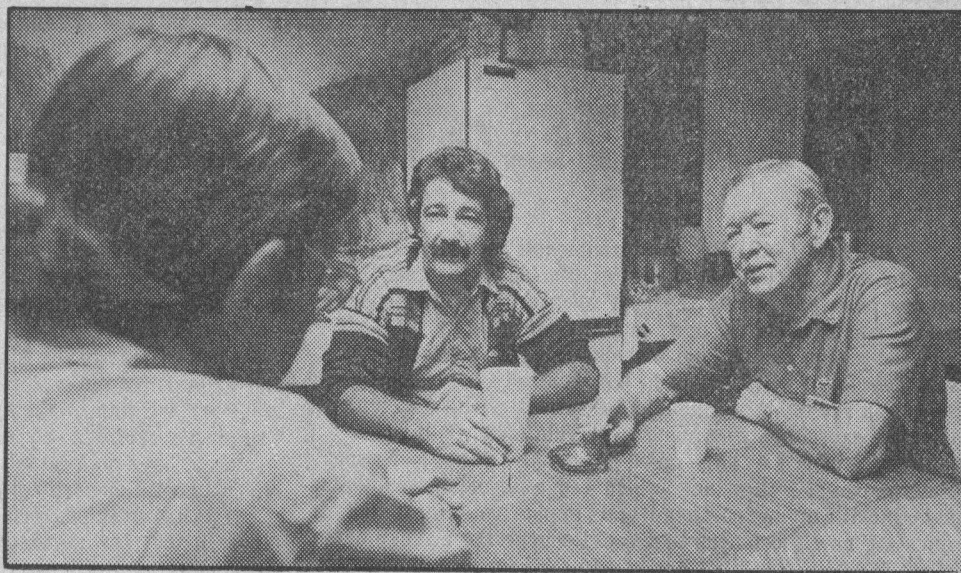
Chuck Woll, director of Janus recovery, estimates about 10,000 adults in Santa Cruz County have a serious drinking problem. One in 10 of those, or 1,000 alcoholics, are seriously working to maintain sobriety. It is from that pool that Janus draws most of its volunteers.

Janus, funded through the county, has 20 full- and part-time employees and depends heavily on volunteers to keep its three-to-five day detoxification service, and its 28-day residential recovery program, running smoothly. There are 30 volunteers now, who do everything from paperwork to scrubbing floors. And, perhaps most important, they spend time with the problem drinkers coming in, the ones who are wrestling with alcohol and losing.

Most of the volunteers have been to the edge, looked over, and have made it back. Recovering alcoholics themselves, they understand the attitudes, an alcoholic's behavior, the fears and the despair of drinkers who must stop but can't.

"We look for interest, enthusiasm, someone who can relate to people, and certainly, for sobriety," says volunteer coordinator Brandon Cornell. "For sobriety, and a dedication to sobriety and recovery."

Although some volunteers are non-alcoholics who in some way have been affected by the disease, and some students do research for papers by volunteering, Cornell says, for the most part, "We can't use casual, social drinkers. They don't understand the problems of the alcoholic, and can be totally unsympathetic."



Bob Mello, center, and Ed Brown, right, lend support to Janus patient.

Bob Mello, 43, sobered up in Janus' detox unit two years ago after 26 years drunk. He now spends 12 to 15 hours a week giving back some of what he got there, he says.

It didn't come easy to him. He walked in and out of detox four times. The fifth time, he says, "They drug me in."

Mello, who is now legally blind from alcohol-induced vitamin deficiency, says, "I tried three times to kill myself, I lost my family, my eyesight, jobs, I got arrested 12 times for drunken driving, I did four years in jail — I finally just got sick and tired of being sick and tired."

Asked how successful he is in helping others to sober up, he said, "I carry the message that there is help, and plant the seed. It's not going to be 100 percent, but I see it working."

Volunteers attend six half-hour training sessions, and pledge 50 hours of service over three months. In the sessions, Woll talks about alcohol's impact on the community and Janus's response to it. He explains alcohol's effects on

the body, how to handle emergencies, crisis counseling and trains volunteers in doing paperwork. "And," he adds, "we're motivating them to share their sobriety. That's it in a nutshell."

That sharing benefits both the volunteer and the Janus client, Woll says.

"For the drinking alcoholic," Woll says, "or the person going through withdrawals, what they can find is a person who understands their predicament, who is sensitive to their desire to stop drinking, and their inability to do so."

"And the sober alcoholics see themselves as they were just a few months or a few years ago, and that reinforces their commitment to sobriety."

Volunteer Ed Brown, 68, sober 29 months, says, "I do it to get out of my self-centeredness and fears. I try to do everything I can around here, because it means another day of sobriety, and that's a gift in itself."

The next training sessions being Sept. 28. For more information, call 462-1060.