

Therapy Group Gathers at Monroe Correctional Facility
by Dick Laidlaw, PRAM Chair and ACOA facilitator at MCF
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This winter Friday's session was a typical gathering of the ACOA (Adult Children of Alcoholics/Addiction) group with inmates of the Monroe County (NY) Correctional Facility in Henrietta.

Tossing a squishy ball among attendees opens the meeting. It's a form of checking in. The exercise enables participants to say how they feel, and it helps facilitators understand individuals' "emotional temperature."

Michael has been attending weekly sessions for several months. He tells us that he "cried" in his bunk and was tired of relapsing and coming back repeated to jail. Now he wants to do positive things with his life. Other inmates were less willing to commit themselves and checked in with "I'm OK" statements.

Then, quietly and unexpectedly, Duane said he was not doing well. More forthcoming to questions, Duane declared that he'd just been diagnosed with cancer. The room of 20 hardened inmates became utterly silent. Michael who had been feeling sorry for himself, remarkably discovered a sense of compassion that only comes from a sense of trust and spiritual guidance. "That's OK, we've got him," he declared. "We'll take care of Duane".

The previous week's sessions had impressed Michael. It had helped produced his newly expressed feelings. And, with a focused plan to change his own life, Michael was beginning to discover himself and could reach out to others.

Once the rubber ball is out of the way, the group moves to focus on a book. It is "Learning to Love Yourself," and it tells about progress measured in terms of 40 key developmental assets. The Search Foundation (www.search-institute.org), which developed by the 40 assets, promoted them widely to guide mentors working intensively with youths.

The MCF group encounters many topics: intimacy, anger management, exploring gifts, listening skills, history of adult addiction and childhood memories. It also takes up positive vs. negative approaches to recovery, both short- and long-term relationships within support systems, and how recovery relates to financial literacy.

During holiday seasons inmates exhibit their consciousness of concepts like "peace on earth and good will toward men." At the same time, the line "let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me" reminds them that for individuals to contribute to community harmony they must achieve personal peace.

Since I've been in the field of addiction treatment, both inside and outside of jail, I've witnessed the devastation, loss and mental anguish that accompanies addiction. Paradoxically, holidays seem to emphasize alcoholics' and addicts' sense of failure and self loathing at a point when these feelings are already exaggerated by these individuals' circumstances.

I'd like to share excerpts from a letter by a recovering compulsive individual who has asked to remain anonymous. This person's words provide insight into the agony and turmoil of an active user and the triumph and rebirth of recovery.

¹ ACOA (Adult Children of Alcoholics/Addiction) at MCF is a part of PRAM (Prison Reentry Aftercare Ministries) of the Episcopal Diocese of Rochester area Prison Ministries, whose website is www.prisonministry-edr.org.

² This is the logo of Adult Children of Alcoholics World Service Organization, Inc.

"The holiday season is, by [its] nature, a highly sentimental and emotional time of year. It is also supposed to be a very joyous and happy time . . . However, for many of us, holidays bring severe depression and deep sadness.

"Most of my adult life, holidays have been spent in despair, fear and depression. Unfortunately, it is that way for most compulsive users, and I am a compulsive user. The holiday season [has] always brought feelings of guilt, desperation and dread of the future.

"My spouse could see the changes come over me as the holidays neared. Although I was depressed, angry and unwilling or unable to communicate most of the time anyway, those aspects of my personality would become even more severe during the holidays.

"Now my [recent] holidays have been filled with joy, appreciation and gratitude. It was three years ago that I entered into the Adult Children of Alcoholics/Addiction program (ACOA) and have tried to live in its philosophy. It has changed my life, my family's lives, my perception and my holidays.

"My faith has been restored. I have faith in my Higher Power and faith in the present and future. But, most importantly, I now have faith in myself.

"I have learned the hard way, that there really are such things as Christmas miracles.

"I would plead with those who believe they have a drug or alcohol problem to seek help, and [I] would urge family members to do the same."

My service as an ACOA facilitator for prison inmate groups has profoundly affected me. I can genuinely affirm that recovery definitely improves the quality of life. I wish to add a heartfelt second to my recovering friend's wish: "Happiness begins one day at a time,," and I mean this especially for Michael and Duane.

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