

High Point Enterprise

High Point, N.C.

# Delancey Street New Program Gives Addicts Hope On A Road From Ruin

By Jeff Herrin

STAFF WRITER

GREENSBORO — Joe sat behind a building not far from your house last Christmas Eve, thinking about his life, holding a gun to his head.

Over and over the question turned. Life or death? Life or death?

"I was really going to do it," he said a few days ago. "I got fed up with it. The guilt and whatever you want to call it had caught up with me. I hated myself."

In a sense, Joe did end his life that night. A life of drugs and ripping off offices and stealing from people he was supposed to love.

Joe's older sister opened her door to him once more last Christmas. They talked until dawn about what Joe was going to do to change.

They talked, oddly enough, about the Christmas tree that stood in the room with them and about where Joe's sister had bought it. Delancey Street.

That's not an address. That's a paradise.

\*\*\*

The clock skips ahead six months, and it's 2 p.m. on a Friday in June. Joe's painting a room. John's slicing cheesecake. Jeanette's taking inventory on the plants she sells.

They and the 16 others who live with them could book cells into the 1990s with the kind of prison time they face. Larceny. Burglary. Drug deals. Auto theft.

A big guy with a brushy mustache walks through the house. The shadows on his record are blacker than any of the others'. Two counts of armed robbery. A sentence of 11 to 20 years. Heroin addict.

Meet Kevin McDonald.

"I think there's a fine line between you and me," he tells a visitor at the Greensboro center. "There came a point in our lives where we could have gone either way, and we went the wrong way."

Delancey Street is the road from ruin. For 17 years, beginning in California, it has served as a haven for recovering addicts

whose only home otherwise would have been a jailhouse.

There are no celebrity rock stars waiting to tell their stories to People magazine here. The center has two admission criteria. It works as a parole alternative, accepting only clients who face prison time. It also accepts only those who want to come, those who want to spend a minimum of two years learning lessons they flunked during their first shot at life.

"You hurt, hunger, love and feel here," McDonald explains. "You have all these emotions. Teaching job skills is the easy part. The difficult part is teaching someone how to care again."

Newly admitted clients begin their stay with housework. They clean up, serve breakfast and attend group seminars. Sixteen hours a day. Seven days a week.

Before they graduate from the program, they'll be expected to earn the equivalent of a high school diploma, attend three different training programs and find themselves a job.

The programs progress the clients from manufacturing to bookkeeping to sales.

"It's more or less like learning how to live again," says C.F., a 36-year-old client who spent half his life on heroin. "It's extremely hard at first. You can't have any visitors for a year. But I have a wife and a 7-month-old daughter. The thing that has happened is that I've learned that I have to change."

Change costs money. McDonald frets every month about meeting the \$3,200 mortgage payment for the house near Fisher Park. Someone might wonder about the cost of this kind of program to taxpayers.

Not one cent.

Delancey Street clients grow plants, sell cups and glasses, move furniture, work construction and make money any other way they can that's honest. Corporate sponsors donated food, clothing and furniture to open the Greensboro house last October. But the program's goal is self-support within three years. That means the sales and other businesses at Delancey Street eventually



Clients Sell Plants, Services To Support Program



Donors Provided Clothing, But Ultimate Aim Is Self Sufficiency

will have to generate \$183,000 annually.

"Hey, I was on the receiving end of society most of my life," he explains. "It's time to put something back into the community."

The program's formula for success is algebraic, according to McDonald: A helps B, and A gets better.

It doesn't always work. About 90 percent of the clients have stayed the required two years at other houses, McDonald estimates. The others at some point walked out the unlocked door, choosing to gamble again with drugs and the law.

Most of the clients in Greensboro tell stories like Jeff's.

"I started using heroin on weekends," he says. "Pretty soon though, everyday became a weekend."

Jeff, who is 38 years old, figures he ripped off or hurt everyone he knew. Prison became just another place to take drugs. He sat in his cell, looking ahead to 1996, when he would be eligible for parole.

"I'd been in treatment programs before," he says. "But I hadn't even wanted to change. Then a guy in my cell block showed me some literature for Delancey Street, and it sounded like something really different. The judge said she must have been crazy for doing it, but she gave me a chance."

Jeff put in the required two years at a Delancey Street program in New York. But he wanted an opportunity to give back something. When the center opened a branch in Greensboro, Jeff signed on to help McDonald and another counselor.

A construction accident since he came here left him with second- and third-degree burns on both legs. But Triad Therapy Services donated its services — three months of daily attention — to help Jeff recuperate.

"I had some doubts about whether I could do it at first," Jeff says of his commitment to the program. "But now I don't worry. I've come too far to even think about going back to drugs."

John, 25, remembers days and nights of heavy deals and big parties while a student at a North Carolina college. When he was caught selling, he drew a three-year term because he wouldn't turn state's evidence.

"If it wasn't for Delancey Street, I'd either be dead right now or back in prison," he says. "I would free-base cocaine all day, then pop pills so I could go to sleep at night."

There's never any hesitation to talk about drugs among Delancey Street residents, no matter how far they've come in the program. The past is something to remember, to joke about occasionally, but never to cover up.

"It's a lot harder to hide something all your life," McDonald explains. "It's easier to say that's who you were then. That's not who you are now."

...

Joe, whom you met at the beginning of this story, is talking about his new family.

"There aren't any easy answers here," he says. "There aren't any professionals telling somebody what's wrong or what's right. We are the staff. We learn from our mistakes."

Joe won't see his fiancée for another eight months because of the center's strict rules on visitation. But the man who walks out of Delancey Street in 1990 will be far different from the one who came in, he says.

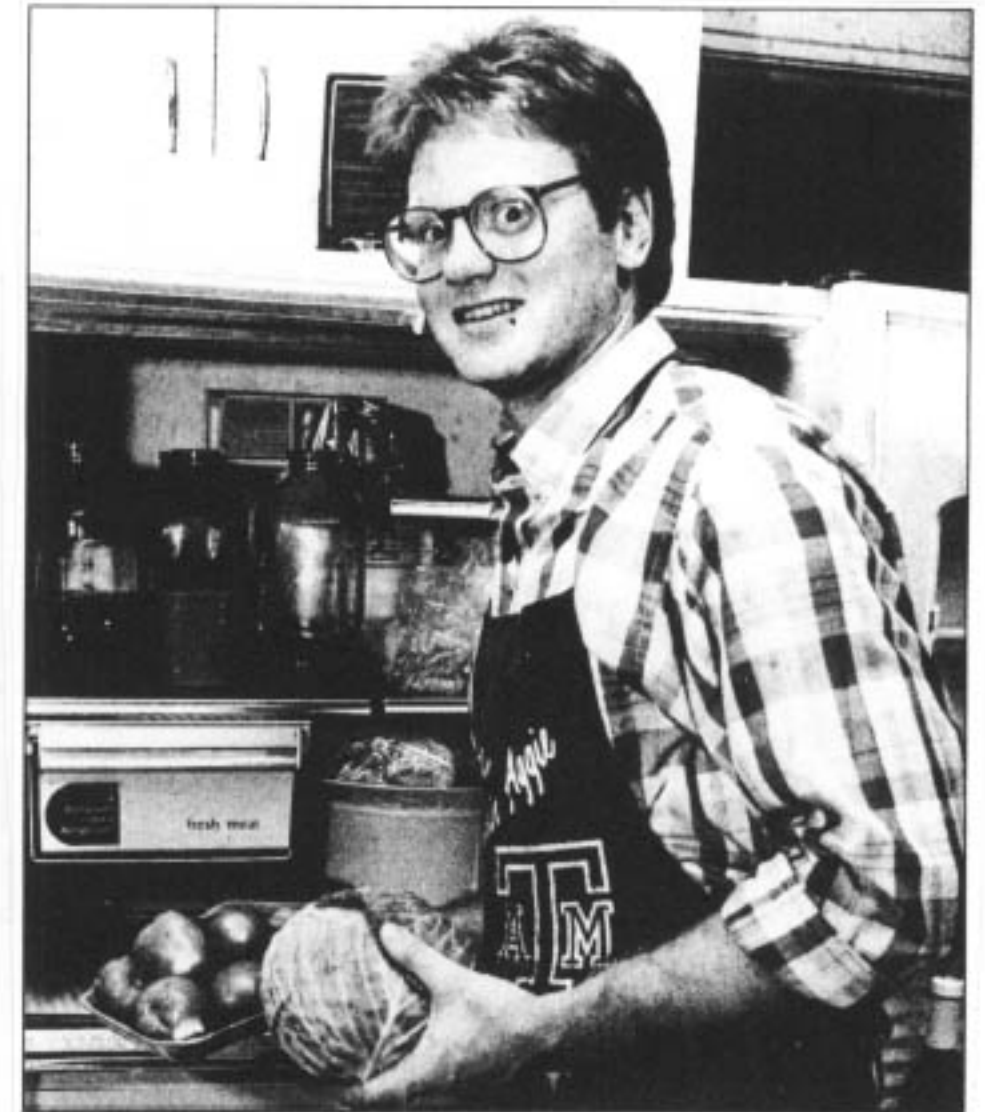
"There are still times when it's hard. But it helps to remember the bad times then, how crazy I was when I was using drugs. And it helps to plug in with someone else here and talk about it."

It helps, he says, to remember last Christmas and for an instant what might have been.

It's the end of the world as he knew it. And Joe feels fine.



Joe Measures Progress Away From Drugs And Crime One Rung At A Time At Delancey Street



John Takes His Turn At Chef Duties In The Kitchen Of The Program Center



Jeanette Keeps Track Of Delancey Street Business Dealings On Computer