

BUSINESS AND BUILDING

The Union & Democrat

In the business of recovery

By ALISHA WYMAN

After what is often years of drug and alcohol abuse, a variety of Mother Lode residents are working to help others avoid making the same mistakes they did.

It's not about profit margins, investments or deadlines. It's about helping others discover what they learned the hard way – that there is a better life beyond abuse.

For Bobby Medina, escaping the prison system and his heroine addiction began with shaving his mustache.

Then he started wearing polyester. It was the way a San Francisco drug treatment center, Delancey Street Foundation, worked "from the outside in" to help him kick his habits, he said.

"Once they took off my mustache, I was weak; I felt like Samson," he said, referring to a biblical character who lost his strength after having his hair cut.

But stripping his intimidating exterior wasn't about demeaning Medina – it was about building him back up, this time without the crutches of crime and drugs.

Not only did Medina reshape his life, he's now helping others do the same. He and his wife, Beki, started We Care Sober Living Recovery Homes about two years ago, giving people with drug and alcohol addictions a structured place to live while making the transition to the outside world.

Based on his past – joining a gang at age 9, falling into drugs at 12, continuing the lifestyle for 20 years and going from prison to prison – Bobby Medina said he knows there is hope for even the worst addicts and criminals.

"I believe in what I'm doing," he said. The Medinas rent one house in Jamestown and three in Sonora. The residents in each must attend three meetings a week, comply with random drug and alcohol tests, and perform daily chores around the house.

The Medinas now have 25 people ages 18 to 75 under their purview. Some are court-ordered to be there while others live there by choice. Some are referred by other programs. Some have nowhere else to go.

With his career, Bobby Medina doesn't necessarily go home at 5 p.m. He makes himself available at all times in case of an incident with one of his clients. And he checks in with each several times a day.

Such structure is essential to escaping the rut addicts fall into, Beki Medina said.

"A lot of the people aren't just able to survive in the same world that you and I live in," she said. "... It's hard to believe how sad some lives can be."

Although not all of Medinas' clients overcome their addictions, those who do make it worthwhile.

"It's not a business I could do by myself," she said. "It's extremely

draining, but it is also extremely rewarding."

Bobby Medina said he wouldn't trade the years he spent in and out of California prisons, because it brought him to where he is today.

After he got out of the Delancey Street Foundation, he was a van driver and drug and alcohol counselor for a halfway house in Venice. Later he was hired to work in the substance abuse program at the Sierra Conservation Center.

Ultimately, he ran the program at Baseline Fire Camp and as in charge of a high security building within the substance abuse program. Earning the trust of the California Department of Corrections was a slow process, but it never frustrated him, he said.

"I already knew I'd have to work through some obstacles" he said. "It was an opportunity for me that I never dreamed of. I had to work my way up, and I did."

Susz Lay, Coordinator for the Amador-Tuolumne Community Action Agency's family shelter in Sonora, is witness to Medina's abilities. Her son was involved in drugs, but Medina convinced him to go to Delancey Street, where he has since turned his life around.