

Phoenix House Academy Helps Teens Get Back on Track



Descanso – The scene is idyllic – gently rolling hills with smatterings of oak trees, red-tail hawks soaring above, and quaint cabins dotting the landscape. It is a scene like one would find at many kids' camps throughout the Back Country. But unlike most camps where kids learn new skills such as archery, canoeing, and the culinary delights of making s'mores, these teens are learning skills that serve not only to help turn their lives around, but possibly even save them.

Located ten minutes from Perkins Store is the Phoenix House Academy, a residential adolescent drug treatment and recovery center that houses 40 students in various stages of recovery. The program uses a “therapeutic

community” model of treatment. Program Director Ron Plotts says this model encourages a mentoring and role-modeling methodology, where kids not only take responsibility for their own recovery but play an important role in helping the other participants recover as well.

The treatment program generally lasts from nine to twelve months, depending on the individual. What makes the residential program at Phoenix House Academy unique from other treatment programs is the incorporation of education into the treatment plan. Students here continue to earn or make up high school credits, and can either graduate from the Academy if they are a senior, or transfer the credits they earn during their stay back to their own high school.

Kids are referred to the Phoenix House Academy in one of three ways – through San Diego Juvenile Probation, San Diego Social Services, or through a contract with San Diego Alcohol and Drug Services. “The Academy is one of only a couple of residential programs in the county,” Plotts said. “The waiting list can be long – sometimes four months.”

Not all of the program's participants are eager to be there. “We do lose a portion early in the program,” Plotts said. “In order to be successful, the students need to take on responsibility and accept discipline. Once a kid crosses the six-month mark, their chance of success increases dramatically.”

The therapeutic-community model realizes that success is dependent on a number of factors, and incorporates a multi-pronged approach in the treatment plan. “We do have a family program and encourage families to be involved. We help parents build up their parenting skills and offer family psychotherapy. We oftentimes teach the parents to re-acquire the power they slowly gave up as their teen became consumed by addiction.”

One might have a tendency to stereotype drug users and addicts, but Plotts was quick to point out that the patients they treat come from all socio-economic backgrounds.

I spoke with four students for this story, all of whom were extremely polite, intelligent, and engaging. However, most tellingly, all were brutally honest about accepting their own limits and addictive personality while embracing the recovery process.

The teens I spoke with came from various backgrounds. Some had a parent with addiction, others did not. Most began their descent into drug use through cigarettes. Plotts said, “We find that cigarettes are the major gateway drug into heavier drug use.” From there, most went on to try marijuana as well.

A scary theme emerged in talking to these teens. Almost all have had a friend or acquaintance die from an overdose or long-term addiction, and yet all said that event did not serve as a deterrent. Most of them experienced an incident of medical distress during their use but also said this did nothing to curb their use, as most were back to drinking or using drugs the very next day.

These four students come from high schools that you would recognize in San Diego County – even ones where you might think “they don't have a drug problem.” They all concurred that there are drugs on every campus, regardless of the demographic makeup of the student body. When asked about how they hid the drugs from the hall monitors or drug detection dogs, they said the chief method was to always keep the drugs on them physically, instead of in their backpacks or belongings, which might be subject to search by drug dogs.

Phoenix House Academy (Continued)

When asked if they had any advice that might prevent another teen from going down the same self-destructive path, all had words of wisdom to offer. Kristina, a bright, former-honors student said, "The happy moments when you're high don't begin to compare to the really happy moments when you are sober. Kids think drugs will help them, but they only handicap you."

Gabriel, a student that could pass for an athlete on any campus, said, "It's your life... if you want to waste it, it's up to you, but there are so many better choices."

Rebecca, dressed in a white sundress, with a white flower in her hair and a white ribbon tied in a decorative bow on her wrist, exuded flair and artistic exuberance. Plotts said of her, "You should have seen her during the holiday pageant, she performed in front of 400 people ... skits and other routines. She was wonderful."

Given the depths of her addiction and the abyss she climbed out of, Rebecca had this telling advice for teens, "I would say to anyone in pre-addiction ... I never realized what a wonderful life I've had. I just wish I'd realized it so much sooner. Drugs are not an escape ... I know how much better my life could have been without them."



But perhaps Andrew, a quiet and sage young man -- erudite beyond his years -- summed up his mistakes best, encapsulating all that he had learned with a simple paraphrase. "Of all the words of mice and men, the saddest words are 'I could have been.'"

When I asked Plotts if any of the neighbors objected to the Academy's presence, he said, "No. We're even a member of the homeowners association for this valley. The community has been very accepting of us and in turn, we try to be a good neighbor. We are involved in the Chamber of Commerce, as well as the annual Descanso parade. We also help clean up the major thoroughfare nearby and are part of the 'Adopt-A-Highway' program." (They are proudly listed as a sponsor on a nearby sign).

The Phoenix House Academy is a non-profit organization and relies heavily on donations. They are the nation's largest non-profit substance abuse services organization. By providing a tightly-knit, highly-structured, nurturing environment, their program gives teens not only hope, but a chance at life, and a future.



For more information about the Phoenix House Academy and the programs they offer, see their website at www.phoenixhouse.org.