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Odyssey House Forty Years of Believing in Change

by Fred Scaglione

Now celebrating its 40th anniversary, Odyssey House traces its history back to the earliest days of the Therapeutic Community movement in New York. The year 1967 would be a landmark in the revolutionary and grassroots history of self-help substance abuse treatment, seeing the formation of Odyssey House and several other TCs.

Founder Judianne Densen-Gerber was a combination psychiatrist/lawyer/heir working with drug addicts at Metropolitan Hospital. Odyssey House was born when 17 patients showed up at her home one evening seeking help. Its name derives from their "odyssey" through 11 temporary shelters before finding a permanent agency home in East Harlem.

While Odyssey House's roots are in the traditional, in-your-face model of TC substance abuse treatment, "we evolved a little differently," says Peter Provet, Ph.D., President/CEO. Odyssey House was quick to develop targeted programs to meet the specialized needs of varying groups

of substance abusers. It opened the first privately-funded residential treatment program for adolescents. Four years later, its Mothers and Babies Off Narcotics (MABON) would become the first residential program in the country for substance abusing mothers and their children.

"Very soon, the agency had broader arms in terms of the population that we were serving," says Provet. "Treating teens separately was a big step. Treating mothers and children in their own space was huge. Nobody was doing it. This has probably been our most significant feature - treating different people and adapting our clinical methodology."

Over the years, Odyssey House has continued to expand and diversify its programming for these and other distinct groups of people in need. Today, the agency serves more than 1,000 men, women and their children on a daily basis, providing residential and outpatient substance abuse treatment; medical, dental and mental health care; education and vocational counseling; and permanent, supportive hous-



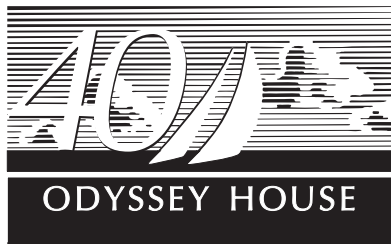
Peter Provet, Ph.D.

ing. Its programs separately target adolescent boys and girls, seniors with substance abuse programs, individuals with co-occurring mental health disorders and those living with HIV/AIDS.

Serving Women with Children

Providing residential treatment for mothers with their children continues to be a major focus for the agency. "We are the largest in the country," says Provet. "We have some 250 treatment slots in residential, outpatient and apartment-based programs." The programs fill a critical need. "It is one of the biggest problems in the treatment field," he explains. "Virtually all treatment programs are underrepresented in terms of women if you look at the numbers who need treatment and those who are receiving it."

Why? Women come into contact with the criminal justice system - the primary source of referrals



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to treatment – less often than men. And, women face the critical barrier of needing to leave their children in order to participate in residential drug treatment. “Having the mother/child program cuts through all that,” says Provet. “It gets women into treatment.”

And, there is another “huge bonus”, he says. “It gives us an opportunity to teach mom how to be mom. We have parenting classes. We have all kinds of child-focused activities with three levels of child care—a nursery for newborns, a toddler program and a more traditional Head Start type school environment for 3-5 year olds.” Mothers attend GED and vocational training programs in addition to their substance abuse treatment groups. They also have an hour every evening to read to their child.

“I don’t think I would be in treatment if it wasn’t for this program,” says Jasmine, who has been living with her twins at Odyssey House’s 333-bed Manor Family Center on East 121st Street for almost a year. During her stay, she has passed one portion of her GED program and enrolled in a vocational program, while receiving treatment for her substance abuse. The next stop for Jasmine and her young family is likely to be Odyssey’s Family Re-Entry program while she prepares to find permanent housing. “It is a good process,” she says. “It gives you a taste of the outside world while you are still integrated in a treatment environment.”

“We call this our Family Center of Excellence,” says Provet. “We believe this program represents the essence of Odyssey House.”

ElderCare

In fact, the Manor has become an extended family. In 1997 Odyssey House opened its ElderCare program for people who are 55 or older and require intensive residential treatment. “We believe it to be unique in the country,” says Provet. “There are many programs which will treat older addicts, but we do not know of any other discrete, pub-

licly-funded program for them.”

The population of seniors needing and seeking substance abuse treatment has grown rapidly. Nationally, numbers of people aged 50 or older who entered treatment for heroin abuse almost quadrupled from 7,000 in 1992 to 27,000 ten years later, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Demand for treatment of seniors is projected to triple again by the year 2020.

“It took me a while to find a place that would take the elderly,” says Doris, who is the youngest of the programs 60-plus residents. The oldest is 76 years of age. The thought of being in residential treatment with a group of predominantly younger men and women was intimidating. “I didn’t want to go just anywhere. I wanted to be somewhere that would give me structure in my life and help me respect myself.”

Yet, while the seniors have their own space and program, they still get an opportunity to mix with younger families.

“This is an example of inter-generational drug treatment,” says Provet. “Our residents range from newborns to 80-year-olds, all in the same building. We have one night a week when the ElderCare residents come down and read to children in the program. A woman who may have never read to her own child or grandchild now has a chance to read for another child. It is a chance for them to give something back. It is therapeutic.”

Provet believes that this diversity of programs has helped Odyssey House adapt and evolve its therapeutic treatment in ways that benefit all the clients.

“As an agency, we are enriched by having these different populations with different needs,” he says. “It forces us to be innovative and creative. When you are treating mothers and children in a residence, you can’t do the same things you do with single adults. You just can’t. You have to think about new

ways of treating the addict. You think about how a child adapts to knowledge that their mother was an addict and perhaps a prostitute. How does that impact a child?”

Odyssey House has even gone back to the well of psychological theory in developing treatment models for its ElderCare program. “We have adapted the thinking of Erik Erickson about the stages of life,” says Provet. “The last few stages deal with issues of aging. The question of ‘generativity’ rather than ‘stagnation’ is one of the biggest issues for individual to work through. Have I been productive? Can I still be productive? We take that concept when we are working with our 50-, 60- and 70-year-olds. We allow them to review their life. It can be painful. But, there is still a chance for them to contribute. They can become a better parent or grandparent. They can give back to the community.”

An Integrated Model of Treatment

The Therapeutic Community model hasn’t always been receptive to the integration of psychiatric theory and clinical treatment, something Provet knows from experience. As a young psychologist, he began working with substance abusers in an outpatient program affiliated with Albert Einstein College of Medicine before joining Phoenix House, where he worked for ten years. Provet moved to Odyssey House as President/CEO eight years ago.

“My Ph.D. was seen as a professional liability in the early days,” he explains. “There was a healthy skepticism of professionals integrating in the therapeutic community movement which had evolved as a rebellion against standard medical practice for treating addicts. TCs, to their credit, knew that the way to change people who have serious addiction and whose lives are seriously dysfunctional was to put them into an environment of their peers where they would live for a fairly long period of time and on a 24/7 basis get confronted, get challenged, be sup-

Odyssey House Services for Teen Girls

Odyssey House opened the 16-bed Lafayette Avenue residential center for adolescent females in response to an increase in the number of young girls with substance abuse and related behavioral/mental health problems. Based on the TC treatment model, adolescent girls live and learn in a peer-driven environment that provides a family-like structure and support.

The girls-only center in the South Bronx, officially opened this spring, is staffed by a multi-disciplinary team of counselors, teachers, and healthcare personnel who give residents the individualized support and attention they need to grow into healthy young women. Treatment services focus on nurturing areas in a teenage girl's life that are often impacted by substance abuse including: school, mental health, self-esteem, family, and other relationships.

With the support of a private grant from the Elizabeth and Baretts O. Benjamin Charitable Foundation, each teen girl who completes treatment (9-12 months of residential treatment including vocational and educational training) receives a laptop computer as a graduation gift.



past several years, Jerold Frampton, a former Guggenheim Fellow and now MSW, has been working with Harbor residents as they produce a wide range of artwork. "This is not art therapy. This is art," says Provet. "We have been more interested in allowing people to express themselves artistically – period. Just the creating and showing of it. That for me is the therapeutic thing."

The results, however, have been exceptionally powerful. "They are at once beautiful, scary and disturbing," says Provet. "We are very proud of their work." For the past three years, Odyssey House has mounted a showing each fall. This year, the show will feature works reflect-

ported, be loved and learn how to live in a different way," Provet continues. "They knew that this change process is terrifically more potent than an hour or two each week of traditional psychotherapy. You can't compare them."

At the same time, says Provet, Odyssey House has been receptive to clinical treatment. "This agency has always valued medicine and psychiatry and integrated it from the beginning. Remember that we were founded by a psychiatrist. We recognized the need for psychiatric treatment long before the concepts of dual diagnoses and Mentally Ill Chemical Abusing (MICA) clients were recognized. Odyssey House has always had a deep conviction that the best way to treat the people we serve is to embrace a variety of approaches."

Mental Health Services

One example is Odyssey House's Harbor, a 60-bed residential treatment program for MICA clients. While the Harbor features some elements of a TC model - e.g. shared responsibilities, a job structure - it is a "much softer environment," says Provet. "There is far more individual

counseling and individual support. Psychiatric intervention is fundamental to the program. Most of our clients are on a significant course of psychotropic medicines."

Provet sees the program as akin to a psycho-education model for treatment of the mentally ill. "You are teaching the mentally ill individual what it means to be mentally ill, breaking away from any sense of stigma. We try to get the individual to embrace the fact that they have this disability because, if properly treated and understood, they can live rewarding and productive lives."

At the same time, however, Harbor residents must also address and deal with their substance abuse addiction, which often stems from their mental illness. "Substance abuse in that population is very similar to a non-mentally ill population but individuals also believe that they are self-medicating to deal with their pain, their memories, their hallucinations and their boredom."

Licensed by the Office of Mental Health (OMH), the Harbor offers its residents psychiatric services.

Art is also a therapeutic option for Harbor residents. For the

ing clients' childhood memories. Tiesha Hansen's sculpture, "Spaghetti and Meatballs," looks good enough to eat. "My mom used to make it a lot. I loved it," says Hansen. "I like art but I am not an artist."

Previously homeless, Hansen came to Odyssey House from Bronx Psychiatric Center. "I needed help," she says. "I have been here for a year and it is coming along good. The groups are great. So is the staff." Hansen is studying at the Manhattan Educational Opportunity Center for a Microsoft Office Assistant certificate and now hoping to find permanent housing in Manhattan or the Bronx.

Housing is always an issue for Odyssey House's clients. The Haven, a 63-unit supportive housing program for people with HIV/AIDS, opened in 1999. "This is not a treatment program. It is housing but it is housing, Odyssey-style," says Provet, who stresses the high quality of design, materials and construction. "We have a beautiful lobby and a beautiful garden. It is bringing dignity to individuals who have been traumatized by their pasts. We didn't have to build a dining room

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and kitchen – each of the apartments has their own kitchen – but we value the community and we didn't want people to be isolated in their apartments. As a result, the Haven offers all residents the opportunity to dine together each evening.

"The food is good," says Tony, a graduate of the Harbor's MICA program and one of the Haven's first residents. "I was homeless and drug infected for about ten years. I am bipolar and when I was on the streets I wasn't taking my medication. Now I have been clean and sober for eight years."

"Housing becomes the main vehicle for long term recovery," says Provet. "We feel that we ourselves need to take charge of building that long term infrastructure. For the past several years, we have moved more aggressively into housing programs and we now have several initiatives at different states of development targeting different populations."

In July, Odyssey House broke ground for a 50-unit, \$12.6 million permanent housing facility with supportive services at 123 East 123rd street which will serve individuals who have overcome many life challenges, including mental health problems, drug and alcohol addictions, homelessness and significant medical conditions.

The agency is also planning to expand housing for people with HIV/AIDS, expand its housing for families and bring on new units for individuals with mental illness. "We recently won an award from OMH to do scattered site housing," says Provet. "All together, we have 150-200 units in development that will be coming over the next few years."

Provet views his tenure as an opportunity to further professionalize Odyssey House's programs and its staff. He believes that the traditional TC treatment model, with its emphasis on top-down, strictly hierarchical decision-making, can take a toll on staff and limit their professional growth. "Historically, TCs did not show enough respect to



Run for Your Life: A Holistic Approach to Treatment

Odyssey House's holistic approach to treatment includes on-site health and dental clinics, salad bars and exercise rooms in residences and its annual "Run for Your Life" event. This year's 5K run was held on September 23rd at Icahn Stadium on Randall's Island and attracted more than 2,000 recovery community supporters from across New York City.

Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer John Tavolacci (shown above with other members of the Odyssey House "Run for Your Life" team) believes that physical fitness helps people in recovery stay focused on sobriety.

"What makes this event so special," said Tavolacci, a long time marathon runner, "is that for the few hours we're together the focus is on helping people repair a spirit broken by a life of hopelessness and failure. For many of the participants in treatment who join us for the day, completing the 5K race helps instill a sense of success and pride."

direct service staff. They were almost always treated as if they were still clients," he explains.

Odyssey House has set out to change that mindset, says Provet. "One of the goals in our strategic plan is to become the 'employer of choice' in the substance abuse treatment field." To this end, the agency now stresses regular two-way communication among staff and management and offers tuition reimbursement for staff seeking CASACs

and other degrees. It also provides regular COLAs and performance-based salary adjustments as well as recognizing staff achievements in a variety of ways not tied to compensation.

"Our staff are really experienced clinicians," says Provet. "We want them to have the education and the professional recognition they deserve and that will be the equal of any program in any field of treatment."