

Monterey County

LOCALSTATE

Obituaries, B5

60
Coast
79
Inland



48
Coast
46
Inland

Mostly sunny and pleasant.
WINDS: NW 5-15.

Weather, B6

B

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PENINSULA



DAVID ROYAL/The Herald

Mike Casey, center, and his wife, Michele, sit in the kitchen of their Seaside home with Charles Pierce. The Caseys' dogs, Momo, left, and Manna, sit with them. The Caseys established a Christian-based substance abuse recovery facility called The Bridge Restoration Ministry in their home. Pierce is a participant in the program.

A BRIDGE TO RECOVERY

COUPLE OPEN MINISTRY FOR DRUG ABUSE REHABILITATION

By CLARA MOSKOWITZ
Herald Staff Writer

Mike Casey says he took his first hit of heroin with the help of his father. He shook drugs and became a firefighter, but heroin took hold again later in his life.

Now Casey, clean for about four years, is running a Christian-based residential re-

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Tracy Mooney
Monterey County deputy public defender

covery program in Seaside.

He and his wife, Michele, have

opened The Bridge Restoration Ministry. While housing only four residents, Casey envisions the ministry eventually housing up to 100.

Casey, 46, and seemingly healthy despite suffering a life-changing stroke four years ago, said he planned his pro-

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gram to meet the needs he felt while he was trying to recover.

"I went through it the hard way," he said. "In rehab, they give you information and send you on your way. But this is like recovery for dummies, and I don't mean that in a derogatory way. Instead of telling them how to do it, we're showing them how to do it."

Tracy Mooney, a Monterey County deputy public defender, said Casey's program is already making a difference.

"We have an enormous need for residential beds," she said. "So many people are suffering from acute drug problems. To my knowledge, currently all residential programs have long waiting lists."

Proposition 36, a state law that took effect in 2001, offers first- and second-time nonviolent offenders convicted of drug possession the chance to receive substance abuse treatment instead of incarceration.

Each year, about 425 drug offenders in Monterey County qualify under Proposition 36, about 220 of which need residential treatment, according to officials with the county Department of Behavioral Health. The county has only 27 beds available at a time, which open up two to three times per year.

When there are no beds available, some offenders have to wait in custody, where they often relapse into drugs and get into more trouble, Mooney said. After the state offered drug treatment instead of prison, they saw fewer repeat drug offenders.

"The whole thing is, treatment works," she said. "It's cheaper to treat than to incarcerate, but the budget priorities haven't shifted yet."

Mooney said she has seen two clients make a dramatic turnaround at The Bridge.

"My office is so excited about Mike's program because not only are they offering more bed space, but they're offering it at no cost to the county," she said.

The Bridge is privately funded through donations, and does not require a fee from the resident or the county. The organization will hold a fundraising banquet with entertainment and a silent auction May 4 at the Embassy Suites Hotel Monterey Bay in Seaside.

To learn more

- ▶ For more information about The Bridge Restoration Ministry and its May 4 fundraising banquet, call 372-2033.

Part of Casey's motivation for starting The Bridge, he said, came from his long road to recovery.

He grew up in rehab homes in Los Angeles with his father, whom he described as an alcoholic and drug abuser. When he was 21, his dad gave him his first injection of heroin, he said.

He started using, and then abusing, prescription drugs. Still, he was doing well as a paramedic and firefighter in Red Bluff, he said. He met and married his second wife, Michele, a hospital dispatcher.

His father, still addicted, had moved to Red Bluff, and as a paramedic, Casey said he repeatedly had to pick up his father in critical condition because of drugs. In 1996, he couldn't watch his father spiral out of control, he said. He and his wife moved to Monterey.

He worked for several fire departments and ambulance companies, but struggled with prescription drugs and, eventually, heroin. He went to rehab three times, he said, but it never cured his problem for long.

"I always wanted to be clean," he said. "Every time I did it, it was the last time."

He lost jobs, he said, and his wife kicked him out, fearing he would never change. After living in his car in a church parking lot, he reached rock bottom. He entered Victory Outreach's church-based men's rehabilitation center in Salinas.

Casey said he was there only three days before he was hospitalized for a severe bacterial infection he caught while injecting drugs. He said he had 10 operations in nine days, including the largest skin graft that had been performed in Monterey. During the last surgery, something went awry. Casey suffered a massive stroke.

"I couldn't walk, couldn't talk,

couldn't feed myself," he said. "They said I would never work again, never walk or drive again."

By the grace of God, he said, he recovered quicker than anyone expected. He is still numb on one side of his body, and has trouble with time and numbers, but he has made a major recovery.

Casey sees the stroke as God's way of relieving him from his addictions. Since then, he has been clean, reunited with his wife, and working to help others recover.

Casey's father died in 2003. Although he never fully recovered from drug addiction, he became a Christian toward the end of his life and found peace, Casey said. That same year, Casey and his wife started a weekly support group, The Most Excellent Way, for people recovering from drug addiction. The meeting draws up to 70 people every Monday at 7 p.m. at Calvary Chapel in Monterey.

"The need was so great," said Michele Casey, 36. "The Most Excellent Way bloomed, because there's not a lot of alternatives to secular rehabilitation in the Central Coast."

Because of their success with the meetings, the couple decided to expand their efforts.

"We're trying to model this on what did we need when we were there," Michele Casey said.

Charles Pierce, 34, said he had been through five different rehabilitation programs before he came to The Bridge in February.

"This is my favorite place to be," he said. "I got out of jail and made a decision to find something to help me spiritually grow. For me, this program is working excellent. Being around people who are positive all the time is the biggest thing in my life."

Don Damborg, who works with the Caseys as president of The Bridge Restoration Ministry, said he's already seen positive results.

"It's amazing," he said. "These guys are changing, getting back a desire to live a normal life."

For Michele Casey, the desire to help is very personal.