

Graduation offers a second chance at life

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From left, Lonnie Hall, Jose Acosta and Erik Snyder, all who completed the recovery program at Water Street Ministries, listen during a graduation ceremony Sunday.

Their lives were in turmoil, drowning in addiction, anger, depression.

Ken Miller, 39, walked away from his wife and three kids, rage taking control of his life.

"I just left one day. I felt if I left, all my problems would go away," he said.

Jose Acosta, 36, kept getting fired, destroying relationships with his family, drinking himself into hopeless depression.

"Alcohol ruined my life," Acosta said. "But I always thought I could figure things out myself."

"Yeah, I would always say, 'I'm fine,' even though I wasn't," Miller said. "Then I'd explode."

Both men could keep trying to handle things on their own and keep drowning.

Or they could grab a lifeline.

On Sunday, Miller, Acosta and 14 other men who chose to grab that lifeline were recognized at a graduation ceremony at the Water Street Mission.

They completed a long-term recovery program, which can last 12 to 24 months, even longer for some..

"The program lets them develop the tools they will need to succeed," said Maria Schaszberger, director of communications at Water Street Ministries, which oversees the Water Street Mission program.

"We focus not on controlling behavior, but on understanding why they are making the choices they're making," Aaron Eggers, director of men's ministries at Water Street, said. "They still have a way to go. This graduation is just a beginning."

The program is four years old and currently 70 men are enrolled. Most have drug problems, one man has a gambling addiction and many have anger and depression issues.

They live at the shelter, focusing on practical issues, like earning GEDs, learning to manage money and job training.

But the program also feeds their souls.

Water Street Ministries is Christian-based and putting their lives into God's hands is an essential part of the program.

"I knew I had to get myself right with God," Miller said. "Let God be in control. Trust him."

The program gets into relationship training. The men learn to talk to counselors, friends and each other about their problems, their anger, their addictions and their faith.

And they come to realize they do need help, they do need to build relationships.

"We focus on helping them connect more deeply, more intimately, and that's not easy," Eggers said.

"Being able to hold on to relationships was one of my biggest issues," Acosta said.

He didn't maintain contact with his three children. His parents couldn't deal with his negative attitude and drinking so they kicked him out.

With nowhere to go, he came to Water Street.

A big part of the program is finding a mentor to help you through. It took Acosta several months, but things clicked when he met Tom Clingan, who volunteers serving food at the shelter on Saturday nights.

The two got talking and a friendship began developing.

"I began confiding in Tom, I could put my trust in him," Acosta said. "It was a relief, I felt better."

"I remember Jose was frustrated, he wanted things to go faster," Clingan said. "So I asked him where he'd be if he wasn't in the program?"

"In jail or dead," Acosta told him.

Learning patience is a big part of the program.

For Miller, it wasn't drugs or alcohol that was destroying his life.

"My main issue was anger, depression, the callous other things that go with that," he said.

He never physically abused his wife, Cheryl, or his three kids, but he felt out of control, the pressure building.

He had no job and was in danger of becoming homeless.

"One day, I just left and went to Missouri," Miller said. "I didn't tell anyone."

When he called his wife to say he needed money to get back home, she refused to send it.

So he spent the summer working. When he came back, his wife told him he would either go to Water Street for help or they would get a divorce.

"I realized my marriage was more important than my selfishness," he said.

Miller prays a lot and he talks out his problems. He realizes that there's nothing wrong with needing help or being vulnerable.

"Being here, the changes have been amazing," his wife, Cheryl Miller, said. "It's been a struggle, but the more he's grown, the more I can talk to him."

Miller, like the other men, will continue to live at the shelter for a time, but he's in a transition stage now.

"I take it one day at a time," he said.

He knows he won't be alone in his struggles, that his mentor and friend, Tom, will be there (mentors stay in contact indefinitely), that the people at Water Street will be there too.

"They'll keep walking with us," Acosta said, a hard-earned smile on his face.

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