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Mission grads take a new path

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LANCASTER COUNTY, PA -

When 18-year-old D. Michael Kendig came to Water Street Rescue Mission in September, all he said he wanted to do was get high and fight.

But Kendig has found a new sense of purpose in life, as have eight other men who graduated from the mission's Men's Christian Life Development program Friday morning.

"The first few days I was here, I was a hopeless, aggressive, little masochist," Kendig said.

Now, the high school dropout has earned his general equivalency diploma and has enrolled in fall classes at Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology with plans of becoming a welder.

During the commencement ceremony, eight formerly homeless men received certificates for completing the program, which combines spirituality, therapy and life-skills training. Andrew Van Horn, a ninth graduate, did not attend the ceremony.

Over the course of the program, the men logged 360 hours with their counselors and more than 2,088 classroom hours.

Richard Bowman, 43, has been in the program for 13 months. Bowman, who is originally from Chicago, abused drugs and alcohol for 25 years.

"My life had become a wreck," Bowman said. "I used to stand in front of the liquor store every Sunday and wait for it to open."

The Water Street Rescue Mission is not Bowman's first attempt at recovery. He sought help at a Christian-based camp several years ago, but eventually starting using drugs and alcohol again.

Bowman, who was referred to the mission while living in York, said the Life Development program has made him grow spiritually.

"It takes hard knocks to come to God," Bowman said. "(But through this program), I've become comfortable with myself. It's a race I've started, but haven't finished."

The commencement ceremony took place at the mission chapel, 210 S. Prince St., in front of counselors, mentors, chaplains and mission residents.

The Rev. Aaron Eggers, director of men's ministries, said some men don't come to the mission for the right reasons.

"A lot of guys come here and say 'I just need a job,' " Eggers said. "The thing is, most of them need to learn how to live."

Ronald Riffe was one of those men. The 43-year-old Hanover native first came to the mission in February 2005 and participated in a two-week program dedicated to job-hunting skills. Soon after, Riffe landed work finishing furniture.

But he was fired after differences with his employer and began to drink heavily.

He returned to the mission in September and started the Life Development program. Riffe said he's learned you don't have to be perfect to be a good Christian.

"I've grown a lot, but have a long way to go," he said. "I've learned that you never let your emotions control your thoughts or decision-making. If you feel you are a victim, you will be one."

Riffe will leave next week for Hanover, where he eventually would like to train to be an alcohol and drug counselor through a program at a church he has joined.

"My mom always told me that with what I've been through, I could help people," Riffe said.

"I think I can make a difference in people's lives."

Eggers said he is proud of what all the graduates have accomplished, although some got off to a rough start.

"When Michael arrived, he was hateful," Eggers said. "But now he's on the right track. He's the youngest guy here and has the maturity of guys in his class that are twice his age."

Men are allowed to stay at the mission after completing the program — sometimes for as long as several years — as they work and save money, Eggers said.

Before completing the program, Matt Yoksh said he was a wanderer. "I was angry, bitter and depressed," Yoksh said. "God chased me from city to city, and He finally trapped me here at

the mission."

Now that he's finished the program, Yoksh said he is looking forward to having a productive life. "Let's get back to normal and not dysfunction," Yoksh told the audience at the graduation.

"There is a functioning world out there. I want to be a part of it."

A former crack addict, Walter Lane said he came to the mission because he was ashamed of himself.

Now Lane, 48, of Philadelphia, said he has a strong sense of who he is.

"Here I found that people really care about me," Lane said. "That I care about me."

Lane said he plans to enlist the services of Career Link, a job-placement agency, to perhaps become a truck driver.

Kendig's future also looks bright, even though it seemed uncertain for a long time.

"I stole and put my family through hell," Kendig said. "But I'm reconciling with them, and that's kind of neat. There's one thing for sure, God never gives you more than you can handle."

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