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Family Care Excellence offers faith, hope, recovery

EAST LIVERPOOL – Raised as a Roman Catholic, trained as a scientist and dependent on her own smarts, Myra Hinds once thought of herself as the last person who would become addicted to drugs.

A successful pharmacist, a wife and a mother, Hinds, 52, of Chester watched her life spin out of control in 2009 when she was caught pilfering the powerful opioid painkiller tramadol from her pharmacy.

“I was a know-it-all. ... I have a methodical way of approaching things,” she said in a recent interview. “But spiritually I was absolutely dead.”

Hinds got the attention of law enforcement and the Ohio State Board of Pharmacy, pleading guilty to a misdemeanor possession charge in 2010 and foregoing her license for a year – after 28 years as a pharmacist. She lost her marriage, her self-respect and her reputation.

With nothing left to lose, Hinds stayed sober by working a 12-step program of recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, but she still felt like something was missing. She was going through the motions of recovery, she said, without feeling any changes inside.

“I definitely needed something more. It was not working,” she said, noting that she was going to 10 or 12 meetings a week.

That's when someone in AA told her about Family Care Excellence, a nonprofit, faith-based organization that offers counseling to people with addictions. She heard that FCE took a Christian approach to the 12 steps, so she started attending the Wellsville church pastored by FCE founder and executive director Donny Lytle.

Hindes took Lytle's class Discovering Freedom, an eight-week course that uses Scripture and Christian doctrine to explain the 12 steps. She took the class several times, and people started to notice a change in her.

"I had to do something," she said. "I came in with very little hope. I could barely look anybody in the eye or crack a smile or anything."

Hindes said she learned about the importance of having a personal relationship with God – not a God of her own understanding, as AA teaches, but God in the person of Jesus Christ. She also learned that she can't stay sober alone, that she needs other people.

"Until I found Family Care Excellence, I was just going through the requirements that the state board (of pharmacy) set up for me. A lot of AA, NA meetings. I went to a lot of those meetings. They were helpful, but it still didn't bring back any kind of hope," she said.

What made the difference for her was learning the difference between knowing about God and having a relationship with God, she said.

"I still am an active member of AA, but I owe my sobriety and serenity to Jesus Christ, whom I met through FCE," she said.

Lytle, a former pastor in Weirton, founded Family Care Excellence in 2009, the same year the ministry started offering classes at the Columbiana County Jail. Those classes, including Discovering Freedom, Discovering God's Design for You and Anger: Our Master or Our Servant, are geared toward helping inmates with substance abuse problems and other life-controlling issues, Lytle said.

Officials with Community Education Centers Inc., the private operator of the Columbiana County Jail, did not respond to requests for an interview.

The classes also are offered at Hope Christian Fellowship, Lytle's church, and Wellsville First Christian Church.

Lytle said FCE, which achieved nonprofit status in 2012, follows a nontherapeutic, faith-based counseling model that is recognized by the state of Ohio and that relies on biblical principles. At a time when addiction to heroin and opioid painkillers has reached record levels, FCE's approach to recovery has worked for a growing number of people, he said.

"We're here because we feel, honestly, in our hearts, that this whole Tri-State Area is really, really bad. It's bad everywhere, but we live here," Lytle said. "We really feel that God, through Family Care, is going to bring hope to people's lives that will see them transformed from drug addicts to productive citizens of our communities."

Lytle said FCE's approach to addiction counseling has more in common with the Oxford Group, the Christian predecessor organization to AA, than with AA itself, although he acknowledges the utility of AA and other 12-step fellowships.

The East Liverpool-based ministry teaches addiction not so much as a disease but as a symptom – the result of alienation from God, he said.

People who suffer from addiction are taught in FCE to get to the root of the problem, to establish a relationship with Jesus, to replace the drug of choice with something positive, and to build character traits that are based on Scripture, he said.

It was at Appalachian Teen Challenge that Lytle's own son, Josh Lytle, was able to overcome his drug addiction.

The younger Lytle, 33, grew up in Weirton and graduated from Weir High School in 2001. While still a teenager, the preacher's kid started to experiment with drugs – first marijuana, then pain pills, Ecstasy and alcohol. From age 18-23, he made the transition to harder drugs, including heroin, and eventually became a daily user.

“I hated being a drug addict,” Josh Lytle said. “I wouldn’t even look at myself in the mirror when I brushed my teeth. ... I just didn’t know how to get out of it.”

Lytle came to his senses in a jail cell.

“It just hit me one day: You have nothing. You threw your whole life away, and your family’s not even around anymore. And I said, ‘Man, I’ve got to get help,’” he said.

Lytle and his family agreed that he should go to Appalachian Teen Challenge. “I refused to go to rehab,” he said, “because all of my friends went there, and all they got was more phone numbers, more connections.”

Lytle spent a year in the Teen Challenge residential program and, upon graduation, decided to stay. “As they were training me, it started to click in my mind that I could be different. That I didn’t always have to be a drug addict. That I could really be set free from this and live a different life,” he said.

Lytle signed up for a three-year internship and then accepted a position as admissions director. He stayed on for 10 years, leaving in February to work with his father and become vice president of Family Care Excellence.

Josh Lytle came on board to teach the jail classes, to provide one-on-one intensive training for those who desire it, and to launch a new aspect of the ministry known as Freedom Homes.

The latter will provide transitional housing and programming for men and women while they are waiting to be admitted to long-term programs such as Teen Challenge.

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