

They Help Each Other to Stay Clean

BY LORRAINE BENNETT

Times Staff Writer

ORANGE—"If I wasn't here right now, I'd probably be at home, alone, looking at TV and drinking and shooting up."

He was young, probably in his late teens. He was dressed, like most of the others in the room, in a shirt, jeans and sandals. He spoke in an easy, off-hand manner, but the words came from deep within him.

The group had assembled at 8 p.m. In the beginning there were only a dozen. They wandered informally into the room which eventually would become too small for their numbers. They settled down on sofas and chairs arranged in a large, casual circle.

The initiator, Norm, began reading aloud from a handbook. His opening sentences might have come directly from Alcoholic Anonymous or NA.

But this was not an AA meeting, although it resembled one in many respects. This was a group called Narcotics Anonymous or NA.

"Our whole life and thinking is centered in drugs in one form or another . . . we use (drugs) to live and live to use . . ." Norm continued. His hair was long and black and he spoke from behind a black beard.

More people ambled into the room. Some went down the hallway to find folding chairs.

"We are in the grip of a continuing and progressive illness whose ends are always the same—jails, institutions and death," Norm continued to read.

"NA is a nonprofit fellowship . . . we are recovered addicts who meet regularly to help each other to stay clean."

He put the handbook aside. The group had swelled to 24. Most of them were in their late teens and early 20s. Only four were women. There was little whispering and no laughter.

"This is a participatory meeting," said Norm. "I'd like to hear from somebody else now. John?"

"I'm John. I'm an addict," a lanky, tall young man with brown curly hair began to speak.

"Hi, John." The group welcomed him in one voice.

"I guess I'm what most people would call a rebel," John confessed. "I used to do something just to find out it was not the right thing to do."

"I've had a problem with drugs. I've been to the bottom. I've tried everything."

"Coming to these meetings is helping me. I'm beginning to feel good about myself and about living."

The group acknowledged his comments with brief applause.

As they spoke, individually, they told touching, sometimes macabre, tales of wasted lives, drug trips, nights spent in cells—some of them padded—and near-fatal overdosing.

"I'm Red. I'm an alcoholic and a dope fiend." Red looked older than most of the group. He unleashed an incredible story of years spent in and out of jails, of fights, of pushing, of awesome highs and mind-bending lows.

"I know I can go back on the street right now and end up where I started," he acknowledged. "But I don't want that now. I don't get that hot, wild feeling from using (drugs) that I used to, either."

Kathy, a slender girl with brown shoulder-length

hair, said she was an alcoholic.

"I'm having some problems right now. I know things haven't come together for me yet, but I'm glad to be here," she said.

One ex-addict said he had everything the drug scene could bring him—expensive cars and a groovy lifestyle. He described the feeling he had when he stood on the corner in ornate clothes, wrapped in self-importance.

"Now I'm looking for gratification from other sources," he said.

"Do you care to say something, Bob?" Norm addressed a middle-aged, balding man who seemed out-of-place in the youthful group. The man had sat in silence, his face unexpressive, throughout the meeting.

"I'm Bob," he began. "I've been hooked on pills. This is my 24th day off. I felt real good yesterday, but today I've had a little relapse."

"I think I'd just like to sit here and listen."

When a light-haired youth named Lee began to talk of his experience with alcohol and reds, members of the group sneaked in a cake with two candles. Everybody sang "Happy Birthday" to celebrate the two-year anniversary of Lee's decision to abstain from drugs.

Now more than 30 people filled the room, a good turnout for NA. This meeting took place, as it does every Tuesday, at 8 p.m. at Beverly Manor Hospital on Tustin Ave.

Beverly Manor is a logical location for NA meetings since the hospital is involved with drug and alcoholism problems. However, very few of the participants were patients.

Please Turn to Page 9, Col. 1

FORMER ADDICTS

Continued From First Page

NA has been meeting at Beverly Manor since January of this year, but groups have been getting together throughout Los Angeles for more than a decade, and in Orange County since 1967.

Many of the people who counsel and lead NA groups are, like Norm, ex-addicts and ex-convicts. Norm lives in Newport Beach and works for the Narcotics Prevention Bureau in East Los Angeles. He has had his own experiences with drugs and alcohol and is able to relate to the groups and the program from personal insight.

He was arrested for selling marijuana and served three years in the state penitentiary. He says his period of incarceration turned his life around.

"It's fortunate for me that I got busted," he says. "I might have ended up really hooked and running like some people I know."

He heard about AA and NA while he was in prison. He estimates that 90% of the people who work in narcotics prevention now are ex-addicts and ex-cons and they get involved to help themselves stay "clean."

He recalls that during the first two years after his emergence from prison, he went to meetings every night, sometimes twice a night, during the weekend.

Now he works with NA in both Los Angeles and Orange counties. Although he sees addicts as young as 15 frequently coming to meetings, the group usually ranges in age from 18 to about 45. Many of the recovered addicts began their partnership with drugs in early adolescence and have battled consistently since to put stability into shattered lives.

NA follows to the letter the tried and proven blueprint for recovery set down by Alcoholics Anonymous. NA even includes AA's famous 12 steps to recovery—beginning with an addict's admission that he is powerless to control his life and ending with the command that, once recovered, he will carry the message of his recovery and spiritual awakening to other addicts.

Norm says some members of NA have been coming to meetings for as long as five years. Most, however, are newcomers. All of them come to learn on each other, to remind each other of the nightmares of overuse and to share the struggle for self-discipline.

Most have a combination of addictions—to alcohol, pills, marijuana, sometimes heroin and even methodone. Norm says NA does not attempt to separate the problems of alcoholism from other drugs. It accepts alcohol as part of the drug problem.

The uniqueness of an alcoholic's problems as opposed to a drug addict's are in the mind of the individual, he says. He believes 95% of a drug user's dilemma is in his attitude. The other 5% is the drug itself.

"We stop a thousand times," he adds. "It's like a cigaret smoker trying to kick his habit."

When an addict makes the decision to separate himself from drugs, he must first become involved in meaningful pursuits, Norm says. He must make many sacrifices. One of the most difficult may be giving up his old friends. Very often he must change his entire lifestyle.

"If they're using, they are no friends of yours," Norm says. If the addict is serious, the recovery method is not complicated, but it is difficult.

"You go to meetings rather than use drugs," he explains. "You get involved with other people who are trying to stay clean. You meet people and if you like being with people, it helps you."

He says youthful users have a more difficult time abstaining from drugs "because of the disciplines they have to put on themselves, and the sacrifices they have to go through."

NA is open to anyone who is an ex-addict. In addition to the Tuesday night meetings at Beverly Manor Hospital, NA meets Wednesday nights at the Balboa Island United Methodist Church, 115 Agate Ave.; Thursday nights at St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Laguna Beach, and Friday nights at the Parton Street Apartments in Santa Ana.