



Sober Dorm helps college students stay the course on recovery

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DENTON – Maggie Howard, a strikingly pretty college junior as fresh-faced and sweet as a spring daffodil, is accustomed to the polite dismay new acquaintances often exhibit when she mentions casually that she does not drink alcohol.

She can see the little gears spinning in their heads: *But she looks so cool! She's so cute! What is she, a religious nut?*

"I tell them, 'Well, actually, I can't go out for a beer. But we can go get a cup of coffee,' " she says merrily – and, if the truth be told, maybe just a little wickedly. She knows a "typical" college student who doesn't drink or do drugs is out of the mainstream on most campuses.



Maggie, a 21-year-old small-town girl from Tyler, is a recovering alcoholic, a veteran of in-patient rehab whose poise and good sense are hard won after the despair and chaos of addiction.

A University of North Texas education major, she's now a resident staff member at an unusual housing service for recovering addicts, many of whom are college students.

"Sober Dorm," part of the private nonprofit New Solutions of North Texas, is the housing of choice for a small but growing number of students trying to get an education without falling back into addiction.

It's the kind of program universities across the country are starting to consider as part of the sometimes-difficult concession that, for a recovering addict, most college campuses are extraordinarily difficult places to stay clean.

"It's college. There's a keg party every night. You can buy drugs at the apartment complex on the corner," says Scott Wisenbaker, who founded the Denton program after finding sobriety himself at age 29. "That's just the reality, and you have to find a way to live with it."

Plenty of universities offer so-called sub-free dormitory housing – sections, floors or entire buildings where students loosely agree not to drink or use drugs while living there.

"That's great for some people, but it's not enough for a lot of others," Mr. Wisenbaker says. "They can have the best intentions in the world, and fall flat on their faces."

The Sober Dorm program, by most college-dorm standards, is extremely strict. Men and women are segregated; curfews are imposed; residents are required to attend 12-step program sessions.

Mr. Wisenbaker says that at the start of the new semester, about one-third of New Solutions residents will be college students, either from the University of North Texas or nearby Texas Woman's University.

Ultimately, he would like to expand the program to include more students – in large part because he believes they're at a high risk for relapse.

Nobody understands better than Mr. Wisenbaker that environment plays heavily into addictive behavior. A bass player for a Dallas bar band in the 1980s, he racked up so many DWIs that he did several months in jail and spent a total of 13 years on probation.

Getting loaded was an accepted element of "the life" – an idea he didn't really question until a band mate died at 26 of a cocaine overdose.

Sober now for 13 years, he recognizes that willpower alone without a support structure is like trying to hold your breath under water.

"In rehab, you're completely sheltered," he says. "You need a transition to learn how to live again in the real world."

The same idea, in fact, is proposed in a lengthy report drafted by a task force at Southern Methodist University appointed after a series of much publicized student drug deaths.

"Of course you can have a life again," Maggie says.

A life you can be proud of. A life you love.

