

Malonson helps addicts recover in sober, supportive atmosphere

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daily drug and drinking habit. As normal as it seemed, he tried several times to clean up, entering detoxification programs and enlisting in the Army just to get away from Woburn.

"I was in and out of numerous detoxification programs. I just couldn't get clean," he said.

At the age of 34, Malonson finally broke free of his demons and began the arduous process of recovery — one day at a time. He got himself sober and cleaned up, went back to school and got a degree, and through a 12-step program he met his wife, Doreen.

"My drinking and drugging pushed people away from me, but now I have a healthy relationship," he said.

That was nine years ago, and Malonson still take one day at a time, only he's not alone. With little support and hardly any money, he opened a sober home in the same house he was sniffing glue behind when he was a kid. Here, he created an environment where addicts have a warm bed, not meals and learn from each other how to live without drugs.

"For two years, we tried to do this, even though people told me I was crazy," Malonson said. "Now it's grown to something that I've never dreamed of."

Malonson's non-profit company, Twelve Step Education Program of New England — Men's & Women's Sober Homes, operates 10 sober homes — seven in Woburn and the rest in Leominster and Medford — which house 140 recovering men and women. The recovery philosophy is simple: work if you can, pay your rent on time, attend nightly 12-step meetings and stay away from the junk. If a resident feels vulnerable or tempted to get stoned, there is always someone around to comfort or counsel him.

"One drink led to a drug, one drug led to a drink," Malonson

said. "When I first started [the sober homes], it was to keep me away from drug and a drink. Now it's turned around to me helping addicts and together we can stay away from drugs and drinking for a day."

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— Phil Malonson

To Hell and back

Malonson's troubled youth was typical of the times. In the early 1970s, drugs, gangs and violence were common place in Woburn. Although he lived in the South End, he often drifted over to the West Side where he and the usual crowd would get drunk and high in the woods around Four Corners.

The images of his youth are all too vivid. There was little hope and no one he hung with dreamed of ever being able to break free of the drugs. Malonson joined the Army just to get out of Woburn, but even there he found trouble. When he returned home, he found his old friends still hanging out and getting into more trouble.

Their hangout, Four Corners, might as well have been symbolic of four walls caging them for

ever in their little enclave.

"There wasn't a lot of stuff for us to do and it didn't seem like there was a lot of adults who had a positive interest in us," Malonson said.

Because of the drugs and the gangs he was running with, Malonson at a very young age learned to fear very little. He worked, but he needed more money than he was making so he could support his growing drug habit. To make more money, he sold drugs "not to make a lot of money, but to buy more drugs."

So much of his income was going toward his habit that he would often get arrested, sometimes twice a day, so he could get a free meal at the police station.

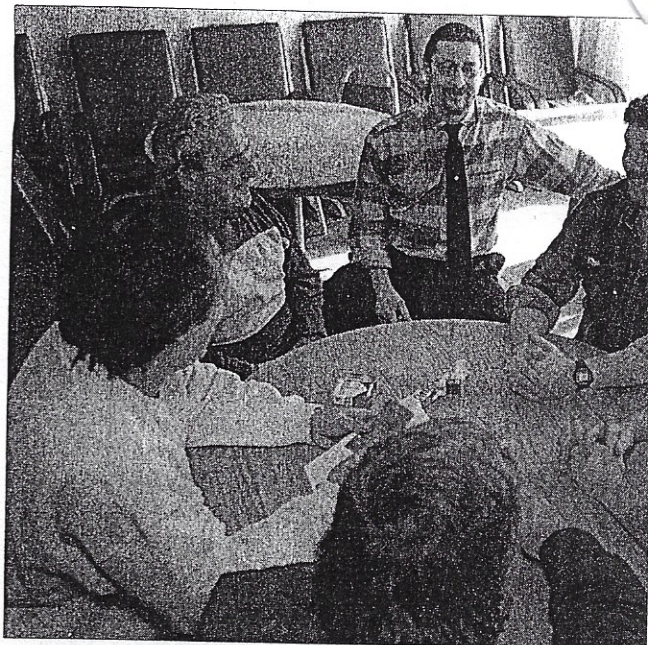
When he turned 21, Malonson moved to Florida, where he worked as a bartender and began using cocaine. His life continued its spiral downward. He would move from place to place, staying with relatives or friends until he wore out his welcome, each time hoping that the change in scenery would dry him out.

He hit bottom in Oklahoma, where he was living in a mission without a penny to his name. He owned a pair of shoes, no socks; pants, no underwear; and a T-shirt. There was no one left in his life, there was no one left he could turn to for help. He was alone.

"I had no one. I had burnt everyone out of my life," he said. "I was sick of being sick and tired and that's when I got involved in 12-step programs and got clean."

"I had to change the person that I was. It was difficult. I'm not the same person I used to be," he added. "When I opened up my first house, it was to keep me away from drinking and drugging as much as it was to help other people."

Ironically, Malonson's largest sober home is the old Glendale Nursing Home. Overlooking Four Corners, Shaker Glenn, as it is



Impromptu discussions about drug addictions and abstinence are common place in Woburn native Phil Malonson's, at rear.

now known, is home to 43 recovering addicts and alcoholics. From there, he oversees his growing network of recovery homes and the extended family that lives in his buildings.

No more demons

The homes are cramped, but they provide the essentials for their purpose. Each house has a day room, which doubles for counseling sessions, a kitchen and dining area and bedrooms shared by two and three people.

While each resident is required to attend four of the nightly 12-step meetings a week, they will often congregate in the common areas for impromptu one-on-one counseling sessions.

"In the group room there's a lot of counseling between the guys," said Brian, a 36-year-old resident of Shaker Glenn. "We're all in the same boat. We're all recovering; so nobody is preaching down to you."

When Brian, who did not want his last name used, arrived at Shaker Glenn last June, he was a broken man. His alcoholism and drug use cost him everything in his life — his wife, his family and his livelihood. He said he's tried cleaning up before, but none of the programs were as effective as Malonson's houses.

"I've been in so-called sober houses before, but they weren't sober," Brian said. "This here is the best."

There is a front desk, but it is an unsecured environment. Residents come and go at the leisure, so long as they abide by the rules — the most stern being no drugs, no alcohol. The residents observe a strict honor code that enforces the no-drugs policy. One slip, they are reported immediately and sent packing.

"Everyone takes responsibility here," Malonson said. "This is their house and they have to make sure it stays clean."

For many, the houses are their