

# The News-Times

## LOCAL

### Coming clean

Recovery program at Interlude invaluable

By Nanci G. Hutson  
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DANBURY — With his measured, oratorical eloquence and hearty physique, John Downey resembles a cross between the rock star Meat Loaf and the late actor and director Orson Welles.

This bearded, bespectacled philosopher of sorts speaks in verbal poetry of a discordant, depression-laden life filled to the brim with hallucinogenic drugs and drink, one that often in his half century teetered on the edge of desperate.

"When your only relief for mental illness is a bar or a package store, you are in dire straits," said Downey, a former aircraft machinist for Pratt & Whitney who, until three months ago, self-medicated away his sorrows just that way.

Downey is one of seven men from the Danbury area who are clients of Interlude's year-old intensive residential recovery program for adults who are substance abusers with a dual diagnosis of mental illness. Interlude is a non-profit mental health agency.

"I constantly hallucinate, 24 hours a day. And I have for 31 years," Downey said of the flashbacks he suffers from all the hallucinogenic drugs, such as LSD and mescaline, he consumed in his early adulthood. "Any plain surface looks to me like a Persian rug, like scenes of Persia; shimmering diamonds, exotic colors, shapes, and faces. It's a very strange life that I've had."

Sometimes as Downey talks, his eyes, behind rust-hued, rectangular-shaped bifocals, drift away. It seems as though he has left the room, though his body is still seated on the couch in the living room of a three-story colonial renovated to accommodate this program in a neighborhood near the main campus of Western Connecticut State University in downtown Danbury.

When he is addressed, though, Downey picks up the conversation aptly, coming forth with insightful comments that speak to his life of



Jonathan Downey has attained three months of sobriety while at Interlude. "It's the best thing that has happened to me in my entire life," he said of the treatment program.



Interlude residents Steven Velez, left, and Jonathan Downey, and case manager Allison Knight make sandwiches for a picnic at Candlewood Lake.



Downey and neighbor Rona Gordon plant tomatoes in a garden on the side of the Interlude house.



Downey, Steven Stanco and senior case manager Carey Wein go for a walk along the beach at Candlewood Lake after a picnic lunch.

addiction that cost him a marriage and landed him in jail. He is blunt about his struggles with sobriety and mental illness, and a recognition that his recovery and that of others like him is not a swift, or sure process.

"It's taken Jonathan all this time to determine why he has a substance abuse addiction. He now has three months clean and that is an incredible feat," said Kathleen Deschenes, Interlude's executive director. "And he wants to capitalize on this window of opportunity when he has clarity, so he can move further along. This is a process. It doesn't happen overnight."

Downey, from the age of early puberty, found relief for his inner anguish inside a bottle, from sniffing glue, or by escaping reality at the swallow of a pill.

"It's like a storm comes over you, like being caught in a tornado, or in a hurricane," Downey described his mental dysfunction that manifests itself in profound depression. "All your dreams and hopes disappear. Your whole world turns topsy turvy."

He credits Interlude as the life raft that rescued him from drowning in the lake of despair and addiction that robbed him of all but breath.

"It's the best thing that has happened to me in my entire life," Downey said of Interlude's treatment program, the original version of which he was referred to three years ago by the Greater Danbury Mental Health Authority when he was penniless and alone with no where to go. "I've been blessed with a knowledge of God's intervention in my life and this is the tool He used to reach out to me so I can re-establish myself on firm footing.

"This program reaches out to people in deep turmoil and allows them to experience life on a more stable platform, in an environment of security, caring and understanding that you don't find on the street.

"It's phenomenal," Downey said.

This brand of recovery is not inexpensive.

The 24-hour supervised treatment program has an annual budget of \$377,000, with those dollars coming through a program fee the clients pay, state grants, private foundation grants and fund-raising. Each client, all of whom collect Social Service disability, pay \$450 a month to live in the house, as well as share in the cost of utilities and groceries.

The staff for the house, with communal, home style living on each of three floors, and a two-bedroom attached apartment that Downey shares with another client, includes a full-time program director, three full-time case managers, a part-time clinician and one overnight staff for each day of the week.

More than two years ago, Deschenes decided she needed to revise the existing dual diagnosis treatment program because she felt a need to offer more supervision, more security and less isolation for the clients who beyond their mental illness are struggling with on-going substance abuse addictions. In reviewing the prior program, called MISA (Mentally Ill and Substance Abusing) that opened in 1996, she found some clients were allowed more independence than they could manage, and therefore, in some cases, their addictions and mental illness worsened rather than improved. She also said the physical location of the former residence, an older building on South Main Street with separate apartments, was unsuitable.

Downey admits he was able to slip into his personal abyss in that setting.

"The first nine months I managed to have good luck with sobriety," Downey recalled. "My money was controlled so I couldn't buy alcohol, but when my money was restored I got back into drinking again."

In that environment, he was able to isolate himself more than he can now, and though drinking was against house rules, he managed to continue feeding his addiction. Though he was getting help to control his mental illness, he was not buying into the recovery program as he is now.

"If I'm depressed, I have a pessimistic view of myself. I think I'm a hopeless case; I'll always be an alcoholic and a depressed person for the rest of my life. I think there's just no hope," said Downey, who in his newfound sobriety hopes he has finally broken the chain of addiction that has defined his adult existence. "I've dealt with a sense of hopelessness since I was a teen-ager. I have to fight it every day."

In the new program, director Cynthia McLaughlin said Downey has become a true role model for the other clients, some of who are still wrestling with their addictions. Clients are admitted based on referrals through the region's mental health authority. Only two people are now on a waiting list, but McLaughlin said she anticipates that as the program becomes more known to other agencies that they will have more referrals, and therefore, more on the waiting list.

The family-style environment in the house, renovated by local developer and owner Bob Botelho specifically to accommodate this program, requires clients to eat together, clean up together and spend recreation time together. Every day, residents are required to attend a morning meeting where they talk about issues of the day, and then throughout the week there are between 16 and 18 other group sessions that focus on education about addiction and mental illness, coping skills and symptom management. Together, the clients work on issues of budgeting, cooking nutritious meals, and employment issues.

"My main occupation is to be a member of the household here. My main goal is to participate in my own recovery and get to the point where in the future I am in a position to go back into the work force," Downey said.

The program operates on a three-tier graduated system of privileges and supervision, with the idea that within 18 months clients will be able to become independent enough to live on their own elsewhere. However, that time line is not etched in stone, but is based on individual client needs, with some requiring less and some more, McLaughlin said.

Today, Downey is at the top of the tier, with the most independence. Yet he does not take his recovery for granted, attending all of the house meetings and therapy sessions that are offered, as well as participating in an out-patient program at Danbury Hospital.

"After six years of recovery, I've finally been able to reach the end of my craving for alcohol. The program has finally sunk in and is beginning to work," Downey said with a sincerity that elicits a supportive nod from McLaughlin. "Being around people more, being less isolated, makes you more accountable about your behavior, and it allows you to communicate your problems and your needs."

Deschenes acknowledges the Interlude program is expensive, but said the human cost is incalculable.

Joseph Sullivan, executive director of the Mid-Western Connecticut Council on Alcoholism (MCCA), said he estimates some 20 percent of his agency clients have some underlying mental health issues. MCCA runs several substance abuse treatment programs; Sullivan said there is more need for community programs that manage both. He suggested there be more collaboration between agencies to help defray costs.

"There is a cost of not doing this, too," Sullivan said.

The Interlude staff encourage the clients to be good neighbors. They know that is the way the stigma attached to mental illness will be diminished, Deschenes said.

"If only one person learns about Jonathan, and it turns a light on, then we've done our job," Deschenes said.

Next door neighbor Rona Gordon, who intends to plant a community garden with the residents, said she has found all the men to be "very nice, very polite."

"I think they have turned out to be nicer than I expected," said Gordon, who has lived on the street for 12 years.

The program's success rate is measured individual to individual, McLaughlin said.

"For me, if they can get sober, maybe they can get work and go on to less supervised housing," McLaughlin said. "One person stays out of jail, one person is not homeless, one stops drinking."

To Jonathan, success means visits with his 30-year-old son once a week. It means sharing his wealth of musical knowledge. It means earning the respect of other clients and community members.

No more is Downey a mental health statistic. He is a man with a story to tell.