

Vero Beach

Magazine[®]

The Gonzalez Recovery
Residences



Aerial view of GRR's most elaborate recovery center. Located in Vero Beach on the Indian River, it offers a gourmet kitchen, tennis court and swimming pool, use of a private dock and jet boat.

A hotelier is among the many local residents tackling one of our county's most addictive problems.

THE FIGHT TO SAVE 10,000 LIVES

BY DEBORAH BORFITZ



The flagship of Gonzalez Recovery Residences (GRR) is this riverside plantation house in Vero Beach. The organization was founded by Boris Gonzalez, owner of the Caribbean Court Boutique Hotel in South Beach.

Health, wealth and brains are considered assets in matters of life and love. But to someone fighting an alcohol addiction, they can be wretched liabilities. Health feeds the denial. Wealth resists the ordinary treatment milieu. Brains outwit those who seek to help, leaving the addict to function in an ever-shrinking universe of work and drink.

It is a maddening existence believed to affect at least 7 percent of the general population (many more if drugs and inhalants are factored in) and is accomplished with

varying degrees of secrecy and finesse. Statistically speaking, that makes Indian River County (population: 139,767) home to nearly 10,000 people with a drinking problem. Without intervention, only one in 36 of those affected will die sober. With treatment, one-third will be recovery prone, one-third recovery averse, and the middle third will tend to recover with additional treatment. The odds of success can be improved considerably with the right post-treatment environment and a steady 12-Step diet, says Boris Gonzalez, 49, a nearly native

resident of Vero Beach.

Gonzalez has successfully re-channeled his health, wealth and wisdom into the creation of inviting spaces where addicts can have a “transformational,” life-changing experience without a scarlet letter pinned to their chest. They’re known as Gonzalez Recovery Residences (GRR) and are every bit as comfortable and stylishly appointed as his newly renovated Caribbean Court boutique hotel on Vero’s South Beach. “The idea is to make recovery as attractive on the outside as it is magnificent on the inside,” he says.

Programmatically, the GRR are designed to equip people to resist the temptation to relapse and make a “gradual, seamless re-integration into society,” says Gonzalez. “We’re dealing with people who are profoundly addicted. For many, going directly home after treatment is a catastrophe waiting to happen.”

Going to a substance-abuse treatment program was “the second best decision I ever made,” he adds. “It was the crash course on addiction and recovery that I needed. It educated and directed me, giving me the outline of the course. People come to the GRR to experience the course, to live it, and internalize what recovery is all about.” To heal is to make “human connections.” A practicing addict, by definition, is utterly alone.

The dearth of transitional housing for newly recovering addicts, coupled with the inspiring beauty and quality of Father Martin’s Ashley treatment program in Maryland, jump-started Gonzalez’s entrepreneurial spirit with respect to “the next step.” The beauty of his upscale recovery residences, four in Florida and one in Virginia, is more than skin-deep. They provide family-style living and a supportive weekly schedule of 21 activities that consists of 10 12-Step meetings, three exercise sessions (visits to the gym are available), three spiritual growth meetings, three leisure activities, one personal activity (study hall, cosmetic appointment, or trip to the doctor’s office), and one family visit.

Resuming work on a part-time basis, while maintaining newly developed healthy living patterns, is one of the milestones in residents’ gradual reintegration into society. In the latter phase of their stay, they commence full-time work and independent sober living with accountability stipulated in an “after-care contract.”

The strength and healing aspects of the 21-point program are one of the reasons the prominent Wernersville, Pa.-based Caron Treatment Centers put Bob Ackley on loan as managing director of the GRR from February 2008 until February 2009. Caron’s mission was to help open GRR facilities in Florida, says Ackley, which were

THE 12 STEPS

ADOPTED FROM THE ORIGINAL 12 STEPS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

- Step 1: We admitted we were powerless over our addiction -- that our lives had become unmanageable
- Step 2: We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity
- Step 3: We made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood God
- Step 4: Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves
- Step 5: Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs
- Step 6: We were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character
- Step 7: We humbly asked God to remove our shortcomings
- Step 8: We made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all
- Step 9: We made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others
- Step 10: We continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it
- Step 11: We sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood God, praying only for knowledge of God’s will for us and the power to carry that out
- Step 12: Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to other addicts, and to practice these principles in all our affairs

shuttered until earlier this year by damage from the 2004 hurricanes. The non-profit also wanted to better acquaint itself with the GRR’s “12-Step immersion sober living” residences. Until then, Caron had offered strictly inpatient treatment and extended care services along the East Coast.

A more perfect locale would be hard to find, says Ackley. “I’ve been in the addiction business for 23 years, the



This attractive house is another GRR recovery residence in Vero Beach. The paradox of alcoholism, says Gonzalez, is that the initial fantastic feeling that comes from drinking at nice places soon becomes akin to “a freight train going down.”

great majority with the Hazelden Foundation in Minnesota, and I can tell you the 12-Step recovery community in Vero Beach is as solid as it gets. I am in awe of its depth and breadth.”

Some movers and shakers in the world of recovery have made a home in and around Vero Beach. These include Father Joseph C. Martin, a foremost global educator on addiction and 12-Step recovery, and Mae Abraham, co-founder of Father Martin’s Ashley program. Father Martin’s candid *Chalk Talk* movies, based on the personal experiences of people in recovery and his own (now 50 years of) sobriety, have become “essential staples” in treatment programs worldwide, says Gonzalez.

Ironically, Gonzalez himself comes from a Spanish wine-making family (Gonzalez Byass, a leading sherry bodega). He is also no stranger to real estate development. His mother, Leonor, was the original owner of The Moorings and his late father, Jorge, was the developer. “I derive more benefits from creating these transitional living houses than from my profes-

sion,” says Gonzalez, a lawyer by training. “Recovery at first blush might have an esoteric image. I try to make it simple and spiritual.”

Gonzalez says the fact that he was an alcoholic escaped him for years. Even after he admitted to having a problem, the idea of abstinence – let alone “comfortable recovery” – eluded him. “I was doing it my way.” With treatment and the help of a “great support system,” recovery became and remains his top priority. “Recovery can only occur as a result of psychic change, whether it is from a 12-Step program, church, or other spiritual source.”

After getting sober, Gonzalez began volunteering at a local homeless shelter trying to help individuals afflicted with the disease. “For quite a while my own drinking buddies avoided me as if I had the plague,” he recalls. “As it became evident that my life was improving, my family and friends would inquire about recovery and ask where they might go after treatment for continued support.”

Until the establishment of his first recovery residence

in December 1990, the places he had to show them were “wonderful, yet lacked a certain appeal.” That made it easy for those in early recovery and still steeped in denial to conclude that their addiction “must not be that bad.”

The “paradox of alcoholism,” says Gonzalez, is that the initial fantastic feeling that comes from drinking at nice places with conviviality and song soon becomes akin to “a freight train going down.” Addicts hold fast to the belief that another drink will improve the situation until, by force or choice, they end up in a detoxification unit to be separated from their chemical. Unless they “really want” sobriety, he adds, this scenario will repeat itself over and over again. “The last stages of drinking and the initial stages of recovery are often very uncomfortable. And neither comfy surroundings where Happy Hour is still on the agenda nor cold, stark housing is going to help someone avoid a setback.”

12-Step programs are “best for most people but not enough for everyone,” says Gonzalez. After completing an intensive 28 days or more of treatment at an inpatient facility, many people need the support of extended care and/or transitional housing for another six months to a year to maintain sobriety. “For professionals who have

the enemies of sobriety – health, wealth, youth, and brains – in spades, two years are often needed to digest the magnitude of their affliction. Without this support, too often the individual in early recovery ends up taking the power back.”

Admission to one of the Gonzalez Recovery Residences requires prospective residents to be motivated and come recommended by their inpatient counselor, he says. They generally arrive upon successful completion of a program at a referring treatment center, which include Father Martin’s in Ashley, Hazelden, and most of the other Ivy Leaguers: the Hanley Center in West Palm Beach; the Betty Ford Center and Promises in California; the William J. Farley Center and Williamsburg Place in Virginia; Crossroads Centre in Antigua; Cirque Lodge in Sundance, Utah; and of course the Caron Treatment Centers, formerly known as Chit-Chat Farms. Referrals are also being made by Vero Beach’s Hanley Hall, an inpatient treatment facility on the campus of Indian River Medical Center, which Gonzalez describes as a “fantastic facility” at an affordable price.

“Our philosophy is the same at every house,” says Gonzalez. “It’s like getting on a plane to Paris. Everyone gets



The GRR represents a broad mix of architectural styles, including this Spanish Mizner-style villa with its own private courtyard.



This quiet, domestic scene is typical of the serene interiors provided at GRR recovery homes.

to Paris, but you have coach, business and first class. You get a water view at some places, or your own bathroom.”

The GRR represents a broad mix of architectural styles, from a cheerfully updated 1920s cracker house to a suburban colonial home within the Washington, D.C., beltway and a Spanish Mizner-style villa with its own private courtyard, reflecting the prevailing taste within the particular community of which it’s a part. Amenities at the GRR’s “flagship” Florida Plantation Home include a gourmet kitchen, tennis court and swimming pool, waterfront balconies, use of private dock and jet boat, and a part-time gardener and housekeeper.

The recovery residence in Alexandria is licensed by the Virginia Department of Mental Health as an extended-care facility and includes treatment by licensed therapists on the premises. “At all the other facilities, occupants function more like a healthy family unit with junior members commingling with the more experienced ones,” says Gonzalez. “We have sit-down dinners and everyone has chores to do.” In Florida, therapy and any other required services are provided by local professionals offsite.

Visits from relatives and friends are limited at first, says Gonzalez, but the ultimate goal is to have residents

reunite with their family. “Treating the family is critical and this usually begins before the residents come to us. Most of our referral sources have terrific family programs.”

The cost of residency, while not inexpensive, is less costly financially as well as emotionally than chronic relapse, says Gonzalez. “All too often addicts go in and out of treatment. Once or twice a year is common.”

Price need never be an obstacle of entry into any of the GRR facilities, he adds. “I’ll talk to anyone who seriously wants recovery, whether they have money or not, because I think living in a supportive, sober environment is the ticket to long-term sobriety.” But the focus of scholarships is on the backend, providing opportunities for residents to share their “experience, strength and hope” in exchange for housing. “What we don’t want to do is to enable people by giving them something for nothing.”

The Gonzalez Recovery Residences are themselves “metaphors of recovery,” turning tired – and in some cases wholly dilapidated – structures into magnificent dwellings, says Gonzalez. Renovations to the homes have foreshadowed the personal transformations of literally hundreds of their subsequent occupants.

Gonzalez first became acquainted with Caron Treat-

ment Centers in the mid-1990s, when he visited Wernersville, Pa. Since then, he says, he has been impressed with the quality of care, the “esprit de corps,” and the “facelift” that Caron facilities have experienced under the presidency of Doug Tieman. The Caron-GRR collaboration “brought both forces together to offer that much more.”

Caron has been a regular attendee of the weekend-long International Treatment Centers Conference (ITCC) that Gonzalez has been co-hosting for the past seven years in Vero Beach with one of the world’s foremost interventionists, John Soutworth of Boise, Idaho. “The ITCC has been a magnet for the recovery community and was even held following the 2004 hurricanes,” says Gonzalez. “It has yielded any number of wonderful friendships,” one of the most notable being with prominent Vero Beach caterer Elizabeth Kennedy.

Gonzalez met Kennedy when she catered the first ITCC in 2002. Since then, Kennedy has been helping

Gonzalez with the ITCC as well as many aspects of the GRR in addition to running her own business. “I have enormous respect and passion for recovery and it is my privilege to help in any way,” she says.

There’s plenty of demand for every sort of transitional housing for recovering substance abusers, but aesthetically pleasing options for the recovery-minded have been in particularly short supply. The GRR’s uniqueness stems from its visual appeal as well as the motivation of its clientele, explains Gonzalez: “People who are not serious about recovery or want to play games are not for us.” Among those who have been through his one-of-a-kind structured sober-living program are a number of Vero Beach executives and professionals. Collectively, they score a “B+ or above” on the recovery scale for stays of a year or more.

The goal for Gonzalez was never to break into the “recovery business,” but simply to create appealing recovery venues for others to manage long-term. He has



Not all GRR centers are in Florida. This one is in Virginia, where treatment is provided on the premises by licensed therapists.



The GRR facilities, such as the riverfront Florida Plantation Home above, maintain family-style living and a supportive weekly schedule of 21 activities that consists of ten 12-Step meetings, three exercise sessions (visits to the gym are available), three spiritual growth meetings, three leisure activities, one personal activity (study hall, cosmetic appointment, or trip to the doctor's office), and one family visit.



Boris Gonzalez' recovery-home program "has yielded a number of wonderful friendships," he says. With him here is Vero Beach caterer Elizabeth D. Kennedy.

already turned over management of several transitional living residences in Virginia, his part-time home before 9/11, to "graduates" of his program. Caron was a strong candidate to temporarily manage the GRR's Florida houses, he says, because of its supervisory expertise.

The GRR's signature "elegant quality and care" also has the endorsement of many of recovery's heavy hitters. The very concept of the GRR, according to Father Martin, "is different from that which governed previous extended-care houses because it appeals to some who would balk at spending time in other facilities."⁸



This private riverfront bedroom at the Florida Plantation Home allows for relaxation and sharing of experiences in a comfortable environment.



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