

New York Therapeutic Communities Still Stay'n Out After Thirty Years

by Fred Scaglione

Ron Williams understands recidivism.

"The first time I got out of prison I swore I was never going back," says Williams who founded New York Therapeutic Communities thirty years ago. "I swore that if I ever used drugs again I hoped that lightning would strike me. I was dead serious."

However, leaving prison isn't easy. "As soon as you walk out and the door shuts behind you, your entire social network for the last three years is gone -- all the people you have lived with and depended on," says Williams. "Now you are out there by yourself. You come back to your old neighborhood with whatever little bit of money you have and find that the bar where you used to hang out -- and that you have been dreaming about for years -- is gone. In fact the whole building is gone. It is a parking lot. The girl you used to see is married and has a kid. You don't see anybody you know."

Then something wonderful...and terrible...happens. "A guy calls you from the other side of the street," Williams explains. It's 'Buster' who you used to know a little. He welcomes you back. He offers to help you get high and turns you on to a little 'job' you can do together that night. It will be easy. You turn him down.

"Uh, not now."

"What's wrong?" asks Buster. "You used to have heart. What did they do to you?"

"Nah, not right now."

"OK," says Buster who turns to walk off.

"The only face you have seen that even recognizes you is now walking away," explains Williams. "You are standing there with no where to go and nothing to do."

"Buster, wait. I'll just walk with you."

"That is recidivism," says Williams. "At that point it isn't about the drugs. Man is a social animal. If you do not have a vehicle that can assist you through the transition and fill the voids in your life when you come out of prison you are susceptible, extremely susceptible, to relapse."

New York Therapeutic Community (NYTC) is all about transitions -- building a therapeutic bridge that starts with prison-based drug treatment and continues seamlessly into community-based residential treatment upon the inmate's parole.

Stay'n Out

In 1977, NYTC launched "Stay'n Out", its nine- to 12-month therapeutic community drug treatment program for inmates in the Arthur Kill Correctional Facility on Staten Island and the



Ron Williams

Bayview Correctional Facility in Manhattan. NYTC connects Stay'n Out graduates with residential drug treatment programs throughout the region. In 1989, NYTC opened Serendipity I, its own 50-bed residential program in Bedford Stuyvesant. In 2001, Serendipity II, for 40 women, opened for a block away.

Getting out and staying out of prison has never been easy. Thirty years ago, getting back in to run a prison-based treatment program wasn't easy either. NYTC's Stay'n Out program began as a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice through New York State's Department of Substance Abuse Services (DSAS) to test the effectiveness of drug treatment for prison inmates. With increasing numbers of substance abusers behind bars, rather than in treatment, the project sounded like a good idea to both DSAS and the Division of Correctional Services (DOCS). NYTC, then a coalition of Therapeutic Community (TC) model treatment programs, was contracted to take on the initiative and Ron Williams was recruited to run it.



For information about the programs run by
New York Therapeutic Communities, Inc.
 visit www.staynout.org.

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Williams had been a pioneer within the substance abuse treatment community in New York since 1967 when he and five other recovering drug addicts left their hospital-based detox program and founded Phoenix House to help each other stay clean. In 1974, he had moved to Lower Eastside Service Center (LESC) to found "Su Casa", the nation's first Methadone-to-Abstinence Residential Therapeutic Community.

While Stay'n Out may have appealed to the Albany-based leadership of DSAS and DOCS, it drew considerably less official support behind the walls at Arthur Kill Correctional Facility on Staten Island. "I don't want you

Residents progress through a series of therapeutic phases, confronting the issues and choices which have brought them to this crossroads in life. There are morning meetings, evening meetings and encounter groups, all of which take place right in the unit. Residents are assigned to an escalating series of job assignments within the "Family". Someone calls the meetings to order. Someone handles laundry. Someone does "room" checks and someone else issues "consequences" for violations of the community rules. Residents earn and lose privileges – bed assignments, extra TV-time, etc. – based on their attitudes and behavior. "We have the same standards in terms of cleanliness and order as you would have in a community based residence," says Sandeep Varma, Executive Vice President at NYTC.

Initially, the authorities at Arthur Kill were skeptical. In the "Three 'C's" hierarchy of prison – cops, crooks and counselors – the latter hold the most uncertain of positions, explains Williams. "Whose side are you on? There is a balance in prison that is interrupted by the introduction of a treat-

ment program."

Williams recognized this deep-rooted skepticism for what it was – a learned response to reality for most correction officers (COs). "You'll be back" they tell inmates because the only inmates they ever see again are those who are rearrested. They never see success; successful ex-offenders don't come back.

Williams began changing that reality when he proposed hiring Dorian McGee, an early graduate of both Stay'n Out and Phoenix House and a former Arthur Kill inmate, as a counselor in the program. Despite significant opposition, on the day McGee started COs from throughout the facility stopped by to take a look. "Suddenly you started to hear how they always knew McGee would make it," says Williams. "Suddenly they wanted a piece of this success."

Graduations and reunions in which program graduates come back to mingle with new residents and their former wardens and COs have always been an important part of the Stay'n Out model. "It was people like McGee who really cut through these issues," says Williams. "Now, about a quarter of our staff are program graduates."

However, Stay'n Out only first secured its place within the Arthur Kill Correctional Facility when, after two years, Williams saw the light. "What's in it for them?" he asked himself. "Until then I had been talking about saving lives and reforming inmates." At a meeting with the warden, Williams rolled out his new "cost benefit" analysis. "I have been here for two years," he told the warden, "and during those two years you have not had a sexual assault on my unit, not a stabbing, not a pipe attack. You have not had an officer attacked on my unit. As a matter of fact you haven't had so much as a fist fight on my unit. That got his attention." What really sold the case was when Williams explained that COs on the Stay'n Out unit took significantly fewer sick days than the average correction officer. "They weren't afraid to come to work. Things were happening on the unit. It was interesting."

William's effective sales pitch for the value of Stay'n Out paid off a year later when the initial three-year Federal grant ran out. DSAS was willing to continue the program, but only if DOCS would pay for it. In a complete 180 degree turnabout, DOCS agreed...and has continued to fund the program for almost three decades since.

Stay'n Out was not the very first prison-based TC-model treatment program. "Synanon tried something on the West Coast and there were one or two others," says Williams. However, Stay'n Out was the first to demonstrate any staying power of its own. "None of the others lasted more than a year or two," says Williams.

Over the years, Stay'n Out has proven to be highly successful. Independent evaluations of the program by NDRI have found that 77% of inmates completing both the in-prison Stay'n Out program and the community-based residential component were employed, drug free and arrest free after five years.



Stay'n Out helps inmates make the transition back into society by linking them directly to community-based treatment programs, like NYTC's own Serendipity I program in Bedford Stuyvesant.

here," the facility's Superintendent told Williams directly during their first meeting. The Stay'n Out staff soon learned that metal detectors can be extraordinarily sensitive – "They would pick up the fillings in your teeth" -- and searching a bag lunch leaves a messy and unappetizing meal. "You couldn't do anything," says Williams. "That would have just made it worse."

Despite the petty harassment, Stay'n Out began with much the same model that exists today. Inmates within approximately one-year of parole with substance abuse problems and an interest in the program are assigned to a specially designated dormitory.

The unit functions as a traditional therapeutic community, albeit with a few significant modifications required by its location at the center of a 1,000-inmate state prison.

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DOCS conducted its own evaluation a year or two later and found a 68% success rate for program graduates after 10 years. "These are very good results," says Varma. "We are very proud of the program's success." He estimates that the completion rate for each of the program components vary. Approximately 60% of participants complete the prison-based program and 50-55% complete the community-based residential programs.

Based on these results, Stay'n Out has served as a model for similar programs across the country and around the world. In the early 1990s, then-Governor Ann Richards called from Texas to say she would like to visit. She toured the Stay'n Out program, chatted with inmates and went home to begin rolling out a plan to develop 18,000 treatment beds throughout the Texas system. She contracted with outside providers to run the programs, including NYTC which suddenly found itself with a program in Amarillo. Unfortunately, the initiative came to an abrupt halt after Richards lost her reelection bid to one George W. Bush.

Other replications of Stay'n Out include the highly successful Key and Crest programs in Maryland as well as programs in Delaware, Ohio and California. NYTC has even exported the model overseas. "It is being implemented in Thailand, Malaysia and Italy," says Williams. "It has become worldwide."

"This week we have a delegation coming from Guyana, Barbados and Jamaica who want to start correctional-based treatment programs in those countries," says Varma. "These visits are a fairly regular occurrence."

Serendipity I

Until 1989, NYTC operated only the prison-based Stay'n Out portion of the two pronged program model. Graduates were successfully connected to community-based treatment programs but NYTC did not have a program of its own. "We had been looking all over the place to find a site," says Williams. "Finally we came across this property in Bedford Stuyvesant and we tried to open it up." He likens the community response to running into a buzz saw.



New York Therapeutic Communities' Stay'n Out program provides in-prison drug treatment for inmates nearing parole at the Arthur Kill Correctional Facility on Staten Island.

"I had faced some community opposition when I was at Phoenix House but I had never faced anything like this," he says. "I didn't know Brooklyn. I had no idea Bedford Stuyvesant was so cohesive, that they had block committees and politically active people." He recalls being asked by an upstanding member of the community where he was going to park his car and which subway stop his staff would be coming to for night shifts at the residence. "I had never been personally threatened before," says Williams.

NYTC's primary – if not sole – local supporter was State Senator Velmanette Montgomery, a former social worker, who had been won over through a visit by Stay'n Out program graduate John David. Montgomery had known David, a Bed Stuy native, before he turned his life around. "She told me that if this program could work for John David, then we need it here," says Williams. Montgomery braved a near revolt from her own constituency who threatened to punish her at the polls come reelection time.

Once again, Williams worked to win over the community by addressing the issues they were concerned about. Residents feared the program would scare off a bank located next door – the only bank in an 18-square block area. Williams resolved that concern when he promised to move the agency's account

into the branch and open separate accounts for each of the 50 residents. He mustered program participants as volunteers for painting and maintenance at local senior and child care centers. Stay'n Out graduates began offering anti-drug, anti-crime programs at community schools. And, he created a Friends of Serendipity program. "If you were coming home at 11:00 at night and were feeling nervous, call us," he explains. "We'll send over two strapping guys to meet you at the subway and walk you to your door."

Before long, the facility had become an accepted part of the community – so much a part that when NYTC took over an abandoned OASAS facility to open a 40-bed Women's program, Serendipity II – there was hardly a ripple.

Today, Serendipity I treats 50 men as they work to turn their lives around. Alan Williams serves as a role model for success. "I was the first resident when it opened 17 years ago. I was the only resident. I spend the night here by myself," he says. "Now I am back working as staff."

In a fairly typical TC model, residents progress through multi-phase program beginning with a 30-day orientation period where they learn the community's rules and procedures. In Phase I they are assigned a work assignment in the program. In Phase II they are assessed for educational and voca-

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tional training. During Phase III, they begin attend training programs in the community and in Phase IV they find actual employment. Throughout, there are morning and evening groups, encounter sessions and lots of counseling.

Residents typically stay nine-to-12 months as they complete the program. "I meet with clients once they move out for a minimum of six months, sometimes longer," says Al Marcellino, Program Director at Serendipity I. "We have an aftercare group every Thursday. Usually seven to 15 men show up. Anyone can come back at any time. We are open 24/7 so there is always a counselor on duty to talk to them."

In addition to inmates coming from the prison-based Stay'n Out programs, Serendipity gets referrals from a variety of criminal justice sources, including drug courts. Serendipity often serves as an alternative to incarceration. "I got a second chance at life," says Angel who was looking at an eight-to-25-year prison term on his most recent offense. "They gave me an opportunity to take a drug treatment program. I am going on a year clean; no drugs, I never had a dirty urine. I would rather be sober and broke than going to jail. I wish I would have known this a long time ago. I spent a lot of time in jail." After nine months in the program, Angel is looking forward to finding a job and moving home to his youngest daughter and her mother. "They are there for me," he says.

Serendipity II

Serendipity II, a block away, provides treatment for 40 women. "Generally, there is a shortage of women's programs," says Varma. Specialized programs like Serendipity II meet the specific needs of women in ways which co-ed programs simply can't, he explains. "It helps the ladies stay more focused," says Migdalia Hernandez, a graduate of Serendipity I ten years ago who now works as a counselor at Serendipity II. "It is one less obstacle to deal with."

"When we had the women's beds in the male residence before this opened they were always vacant. When we opened this program in 2001, we were full within three weeks," says Varma.

Serendipity II is particularly attuned to the issues of residents, many of whom

have co-occurring substance abuse and mental health disorders. "Probably 80-90% of the women who come here have some type of mental health issues and probably 50-60% are on serious medications," says Varma. "We participated in a pilot project with OASAS to be designated as a co-occurring treatment site. Our staff received specialized training over a one-year period."

In the process, Serendipity II has made modifications to the traditional TC model. "We have had to evolve over time," says Varma. "We have had to decrease the intensity of some of the activities. TCs are very much into strong behavioral encounters. It is something we all believe in very strongly but we have had to tone it down a notch." Instead of the traditional "pull-ups" on negative behaviors, Serendipity II tries to use more "push-ups" – encouragement for positive behavior.

"The mission doesn't change, the methods do," says Lisa Alexander, Program Director at Serendipity II. It is not just a mental health issue. "It is very crucial for women in treatment to get positive affirmation. We deal with a lot of women who have no self-esteem -- not low self-esteem, none."

The approach works. "I was on drugs for 15 years," says Clarabelle who has been in the program for ten months. "I didn't stop until I got here." In addition to addressing her substance abuse problem, Serendipity II has helped Clarabelle get off the psychotropic medications which also limited her ability to function. "It took me three months to see I didn't need them any more. I am stable and focus more. I see my future. This place has helped me a lot."

Probation

Two years ago, NYTC broadened its services into a new segment of the criminal justice arena. It now operates two on-site drug treatment programs for the New York City Department of Probation.

"Each borough has a reporting center for approximately 1,000 clients who are at high risk of violating probation," says Varma. "We provide on-site drug treatment for approximately 125 clients at each of these sites." It is a one-stop service model. Clients come for drug treatment services on site three times

a week for two groups and one individual counseling session. Clients simultaneously report to their probation officer and get drug tested.

"We find it to be very successful," says Varma. "Probation finds that there is better attendance in our program than if clients go to substance abuse treatment off site. They also stay in the program longer." The results are particularly favorable given the fact that these clients were "one step from Riker's" when they first come in.

NYTC opened its first program in Brooklyn in 2005 and a second site in Queens last year. Now it is in discussions with Probation about the possibility of opening additional programs in Manhattan and the Bronx.

Thirty Years Later

Times have changed since Ron Williams first struggled to win acceptance for a treatment program inside prison walls. "From 1977 to today, attitudes have changed exponentially," says Varma. "DOCS folks are very very cooperative and positive."

"I have very high hopes system wide," says Williams, citing the recent appointment of Brian Fisher as Commissioner at DOCS. "I have known him for years. He was the warden at Sing Sing, one of the only prisons in the downstate area to have a college program. In order for it to be there, he had to fight for it."

Still, there is much work to do. Today, NYTC's Stay'n Out programs at Arthur Kill and Bayview are the only privately run drug treatment programs within the DOCS system. (DOCS operates its own drug treatment programs at several facilities.)

Williams also believes there is a growing need for additional programs serving women coming out of the correctional system. "While the general prison population in New York State is decreasing, the number of women who are incarcerated is rising," says Williams. "If we are going to break the cycle of crime and incarceration, we must provide additional services for these women. These are the hands that rock the cradle." Williams is particularly hopeful that NYTC will be able to develop day programming to serve the specific needs of women with children.