

Momon E. Dilworth raised his walking stick in greeting. "Come in, sir, and have a seat," he said. "The people here call me Mo. " He is 72 with white hair, and he has traveled a longtime road.

But the hot, endless fields of the Mississippi Delta he left more than 50 years ago still murmur in his every word.

"I been drinking awhile. Me," he said. "I hit the hard stuff 'bout 1946, right after I got out the Army. And then I started traveling. Riding freight cars, picking fruit, trying not to get killed. Some men are filled with anger, you know, kill you with a baseball bat or a knife. Break your head with a crowbar. Throw you in the river. I'm lucky to be alive. Me. " He was sitting in the television room at **Benilde Hall**, near the corner of 16th Street and the Paseo. The hall, once the residence of the Christian Brothers who taught at the old De La Salle High School, is home to a substance-abuse recovery program. Mo Dilworth is one of 24 residents who occupy the Hall's monastic rooms.

"This place is special," he said. "It's the onliest place I ever stayed sober, and that's the God's truth. I been sober for 11 months. That's the longest I been sober in 40 years. " `Something was missing' The **Benilde Hall** Program was created in 1984 by Godfrey Kobets, a former football coach and teacher at De La Salle who also founded the DeLaSalle Education Center.

"I've watched this corner of the Paseo for 48 years," said Kobets, who is 79 now. "And what I saw was lives wasted by drugs and alcohol. In the early `80s I began to be aware of the special problems facing people who went through treatment programs.

"They were relapsing so quickly that it was clear something was missing," he continued. "Some were coming out of 30-day treatment programs and relapsing within two weeks. " Kobets learned that his observations were on the mark. One of the unhappy facts about substance-abuse treatment is that the relapse rate is nearly 80 percent. Examining the problem more closely, Kobets was struck by the absence of long-term programs aimed at sustaining the recovery process.

"**Benilde Hall** evolved from that problem," he said. "We designed a two-year residential program, and we knew the key was creating a supportive, family atmosphere. " The program began in 1986 with a budget of \$36,000. Its current costs approach \$300,000 a year. A third of its funding comes from the Jackson County drug tax. Despite that support, the program is in financial difficulty.

"We have to find a way to keep going," Kobets said. "This place is unique. Our residents come from everywhere and nowhere, and they find friendship here and a belief in the goodness and dignity of man that stays with them for a lifetime. " `This place is different' Dignity was much on the mind of Bobby Bridges the other night during supper in the residents' dining room at **Benilde Hall**. Bridges, 43, talked about some of his experiences. He has already been through three other programs fo r cocaine and alcohol addiction.

"My first program was out in California in '87," he said. "They shaved my head, made me sleep in the bathroom, wear a diaper and a sign on my back. The first thing I did when I got out was head for a liquor store. I had developed some serious resentments. " "I don't blame you," said Toby Perez, the executive director at Benilde.

"But tomorrow's my eighth month of straight sobriety here," Bridges said. "This place is different. We encourage each other, push each other. And one of the things that makes this place good is the personalities - like Toby here. " He nudged Perez with his elbow. "Toby knows the ropes," he said.

"He may laugh and joke with you, but he takes care of serious business. " Perez nodded. He is 52 and has a master's degree in counseling. But the residents listen when he speaks because they know he was an amphetamine and morphine addict for 27 years and served three stretches in state penitentiaries.

"Toby knows." Bridges said. "Nobody knows when an addict's pulling his act like another addict." In addition to his administrative duties, Perez also functions as a member of the counseling staff. The Benilde residents receive at least four hours of counseling weekly. Much of it focuses on life skills.

Each Benilde resident must eventually find employment. A third of his paycheck then goes to rent and other basic responsibilities such as child support. But the main focus, Perez said, is always on sobriety.

"One measure of our success," he added, "is that 80 percent of our residents stay off drugs and alcohol during the years they're living here." A 1992 study of former Benilde residents found that 47 percent had stayed clean after leaving the program, a figure more than twice as high as the 20 percent rate achieved by most treatment and recovery programs.

"**Benilde Hall** is the calm in the storm," said a 42-year-old recovering cocaine addict who asked not to be identified. "I have eight months of sobriety now," he said, "But 75 percent of the people I went through treatment with have already relapsed." "This is my home" The Benilde residents are encouraged to find a regular Alcoholics Anonymous or other Twelve Step meeting outside the hall. In addition, there are meetings inside almost every night.

One night last week, Mo Dilworth sat in the back of the residents' lounge during a Cocaine Anonymous meeting being held there. He nodded now and then when others spoke about the struggle to stay sober.

Later, as he walked back toward his tiny room, he said: "You see, I'm trying to settle myself down, now, and finally find some peace of mind. Mostly I stay in my room and read my Bible and my A.A. books. But then I get myself in action and do some chores around here. Me. This is my home."

CITATION (AGLC STYLE)

JOSEPH POPPER, Staff Writer, 'Live-in center helps addicts turn around', *The Kansas City Star* (online), 9 Jul 1994 A1
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