



## 'A Complete 360'

### ***St. Christopher's Inn helps substance abusers turn their lives around***

By KATHY DALEY

Some arrive by taxi. Others are driven by probation officers. This past July Charlie H. landed at St. Christopher's Inn another way—his wife picked him up off the street, where he'd been living as a heroin and cocaine addict, and drove him to St. Christopher's Inn in Garrison.

Charlie has since learned hard—won lessons at the substance abuse treatment center and shelter operated for a century by the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement.

"I'm addressing the hurt, pain, guilt and shame that addiction has brought to me." said Charlie, 41.

"I'm talking about things I thought I'd take to my grave. They treat me here like I'm special. They understand

what I'm going through."

Serving 150 men at a time, St. Christopher's draws from across the nation. Their addiction the great equalizer, men who have lived lives of poverty rub shoulders with heads of corporations. Some residents struggle to earn their GEDs (General Equivalency Diplomas) while others earned MBAs years ago. Lately, St. Christopher's is welcoming U.S. servicemen in crisis after they return from Iraq.

Father Bernie Palka, S.A., who has served as executive director for 15 years, said the Inn's staff makes clear to each man that "he is a valuable, decent person made by a loving God."

"That's how we should all be treated and that's how we treat each other," Father Palka told CNY.

The Inn offers individual and group counseling, 12—step meetings and lectures by friars and lay staff on topics like anger, drugs and the brain, and relapse prevention. Pastoral counseling, meditation classes, vocational services, art therapy and other treatment services are available; a medical clinic is on site.

Residents remain as long as they need care, most staying about three months. If necessary, they are then linked with halfway houses or long—term facilities including the Friar—operated St. Joseph's Rehabilitation Center in Saranac Lake.

Former resident Patrick L. found himself at St. Christopher's for five months and then at St. Joseph's. Later he applied for employment at the Inn and now works in its security department.

"When I first arrived in 2004, I had been doing heroin and alcohol," Patrick said. "I was very angry—I had come from a good family and this shouldn't have happened to me."

Today, he said, "My life has done a complete 360. I am getting married in November, and Father Bill Drobach, S.A., (vice president of St. Christopher's) is marrying us. I am now the son to my mother I always wanted to be. This place literally saved my life."

Rules are strict. Residents wear collared shirts at mealtimes, and line up in silence, so as to reflectively recall the people who support them in their recovery. Men take turns saying grace before meals, an interfaith experience since their religious backgrounds might be Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu or Muslim.

For Patrick and others, a key to healing is the spirituality that seems to seep into the Inn walls. Situated midway up the Friars' hilly property, St. Christopher's is surrounded by trees and threaded with quiet paths. A chapel offers a place of respite and the celebration of Mass, with song from men who choose to belong to St. Christopher's Choir.

At every turn, friars emphasize God's love. "I never thought I was a good person," Patrick said. "It was Father Bill who told me that at the core of everyone's heart is goodness."

While the Inn's Catholicism is inescapable, so is the ecumenism central to the Society of the Atonement's founding and current ministry. Today, in addition to ministries in parishes and missionary work

overseas, Atonement Friars spearhead the worldwide observance of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

The Atonement Sisters offered food to the first wayfarer in 1900. The convent sits close to Route 9, a main thoroughfare between New York City and Albany. By 1909, homeless men were climbing the hill to the Friars' converted chicken coop to stay. "Brothers Christopher," as the men are called, or Christ—bearers, constructed nearly all of the early Graymoor buildings.

To this day, Inn residents contribute their labor in Graymoor's cafeterias, laundry, maintenance department and thrift shop, as a return to the friars and a way to feel they are earning their keep.

Licensed by New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services, St. Christopher's Inn earns high marks. Last year the state agency noted that 73 percent of Inn clients completed treatment, as compared to an average 25 percent by similar treatment services.

Fund—raising is also important. This year, a Centennial Brick Walk and Meditation Garden will allow purchasers to memorialize loved ones or celebrate the lives of the living.

In a contemporary way, the Inn continues to fulfill the mission described so beautifully by St. Francis himself: "We have been called to heal wounds," the saint said, "to unite what has fallen apart and bring home those who have lost their way."

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