

USING A SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURIAL MODEL TO TREAT SUBSTANCE ABUSE

TROSA (Triangle Residential Option for Substance Abusers)
Durham, NC

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Thomas White, President
Greater Durham Chamber of Commerce

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SUMMARY: At TROSA, a North Carolina **residential treatment program for substance abusers**, Executive Director **Kevin McDonald** and his colleagues have advanced a **social entrepreneurial model** for nearly a decade. In the process, they've built hundreds of active, engaged citizens, not just sober individuals. This case example highlights how they have pursued the following goals:

- **Build accountability.** All who seek treatment at TROSA immediately become workers in one of the organization's business ventures – a construction operation, a moving company, among others. Many quickly become supervisors, forming their first real experience of responsibility and accountability.
- **Do a good job.** TROSA presents itself to customers as able to do a good job, not as a way to help addicts get sober.
- **Attend to the residents' real needs:** A staff member may stop for an hour to coach a resident through a wave of anger or frustration. Job training includes teaching job-related skills, such as honesty.
- **Recognize what it takes:** While most staff members at TROSA are former addicts and highly committed, each carries a substantial load. They must understand addiction, work hard and convey hope. This is in addition to an environment where the residents struggle through every day. Finally, keeping good relationships between TROSA and the surrounding community requires foresight and strategic partnerships.

The following profile offers an introduction to Kevin McDonald and his team at TROSA:

Each One Teach One: Learning Leadership at TROSA. (create a direct link to the photo essay and from there, a link to the ethnography) This photo essay by Barbara Lau, Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University and (photographer credit) brings to life the day-to-day activities at TROSA. It accompanies Lau's ethnographic study of TROSA (create a direct link to the ethnography and from there a link to the photo essay). With extensive, no-nonsense quotations from Kevin McDonald and his

team, *Each One Teach One* is a lively documentation of how they have developed their award-winning model for change.

Kevin McDonald in *Each One Teach One*: “...one other thing about a leader is that you gotta get used to being knocked to the deck and getting back up again...A lot of people in life, s..t comes up and they lay down and they don’t want to get back up. With a leader, yeah, you can’t quit...When they think that don’t have nothing left, and you’ve tired them out, they’re so tired of hitting you ain’t got no more energy left, then it’s your turn.”

BUILDING CITIZENS, NOT JUST SOBER INDIVIDUALS

Triangle Residential Option for Substance Abusers

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Co-researchers: Kevin McDonald (Award Recipient); Barbara Lau (Ethnographer); Bethany Godsoe (LCW/NYU)

*All names, other than Kevin McDonald, have been changed below, in order to protect the identities of the speakers.

It's a typical June day in Durham, North Carolina; the sky is clear and the Downtown CCB Office Tower can be seen from miles around. Men in khaki pants and neat polo shirts marked with a corporate-style insignia, efficiently move cartons and furniture from a house to a waiting truck. At 25 locations across the Triangle region, this scene is being repeated. Customers are impressed with the efficiency of the operation. "Every aspect of the move went as well or better than you told me it would," the customer says. "If these men handle the rest of their life the way they handled this move and their behavior today, they will certainly be successful." He then adds enthusiastically, "Count another couple of people as in their corner, pulling for them to be a continued success." This sentiment and the word-of-mouth network it fuels has resulted in exponential growth for this moving company – a successful business whose personnel and managers are all former addicts and criminal offenders.

A two-year residential program, Triangle Residential Option for Substance Abusers (TROSA), runs this successful moving and storage company as well as a construction division, a holiday sales business offering trees, wreaths and other decorating supplies, a lawn and garden maintenance business, a contract labor service, a picture framing shop, and a catering service. TROSA's founder and president, Kevin R. McDonald, is a social entrepreneur and former heroin addict who believes recovery from addiction comes in part by developing self-worth through meaningful work. To that end, TROSA trains its over 300 male and female residents how to drive 18-wheelers, lay bricks, perform sales and office work, and repair old cars. Residents work while learning at TROSA, making the nonprofit a nearly self-sustaining enterprise. The staff is paid and made up mostly of TROSA graduates, twenty to be exact, many of who battled with addictions for much of their lives.

To the majority of customers, however, the businesses look and perform like any other company and the employees appear to be regular employees—which is just how Kevin and his staff want it. "People don't use our services because we're drug addicts, they use them because we do a good job," Kevin said.

A "good job" is one way to describe the history of this therapeutic community in Durham, North Carolina. Beginning eight years ago with a mere \$18,000 and staff of three, TROSA now has an annual budget of six million dollars, a staff of thirty, and a customer base that includes City Hall, Duke University, and the local garden club. They have a musical ensemble and a community-service focused chapter of the Jaycees. There is a special bond between the local community and TROSA and residents of the program are kept extremely busy volunteering at local events. In addition, many residents and staff are involved with other local programs dedicated to helping others.

TROSA offers a comprehensive after care program that includes low-income, special needs housing, job placement, and personal transportation in the form of the cars repaired by the

automotive repair training program. In a twist of irony, TROSA has purchased abandoned buildings previously used for drug activity, and residents working with the construction division have converted them into homes for their graduates. This combination of free enterprise and social work appeals to a wide number of people.

“I could bring Republican Senator Jesse Helms and Democratic Senator John Edwards here and they would both support this,” Thomas White, President of the Greater Durham Chamber of Commerce laughs. “Now THAT’S an unusual organization.”

As successful business people teaching residents how to create the lives they want, Kevin and the staff are also changing the way many people think about addiction. Convincing communities to see addicts as people, however, begins within TROSA. As a recovered addict himself, Kevin knows first-hand that treating substance abuse doesn’t mean just giving people a job. Addicts tend to have a long history of self-destructive behavior and of hurting those who love them. Recovery means learning to care about themselves and the people around them. Within a week of starting at TROSA, residents become mentors to new arrivals, explaining the basic rules, responding to questions, and helping them through their adjustment period.

“Empowering residents, that’s the whole strength of TROSA,” Kevin said. “Most of the time, as addicts, we hurt other people, and not just physically, but emotionally. And so, all of a sudden, these residents are responsible and they start having to get close to somebody and listen to their story and be there at night. That’s part of the emotional growth here---you start caring. And it’s hard. You have to practice at it.”

One of TROSA’s success stories did a lot of practicing. Randy arrived at TROSA in 2000, a gang member in his forties who had grown up around heroin and had been addicted to the drug while serving nearly 20 years of his life in prison. Like every new arrival at TROSA, he was an “intern” for the first thirty days. He’ll be the first to tell you it wasn’t easy.

“I came in here caring about nobody. But I learned how to care about people. It was hard, because I didn’t care about myself,” he said. “When you can take your daughter at 1:00 in the morning to go score heroin in one of the worst neighborhoods and she was four years old and you leave her in the car...you know, it breaks my heart. I went to that extreme and I have to deal with that. That’s why I came to TROSA.”

Fifteen months after his arrival, Randy was selected Head Intern Leader and after he graduated in the fall of 2002, he became a full-fledged staff member in the “people business.” His responsibilities now include training the new leaders and supervising the some 320 residents in the program. For Kevin, Randy’s success is evidence of how TROSA’s structure helps residents learn in just two years the counseling skills that other people study in academic settings for four or more years. “Here they have to jump in and be in charge, to supervise people,” Kevin said. “It’s a huge responsibility because it’s scary to be responsible for other people. For most of our residents, they have never come close to this level of accountability.”

Teaching people how to change self-destructive behavior carries the same importance as teaching them how to lay bricks or paint a house. For Alan, the Construction Department manager, part of a typical day is spent showing people in their fifties and those in their twenties how to get along. “They don’t listen to the same music,” he said. “They don’t think about the

same things when they're going through the day hammering boards. So you're going to get these little conflicts."

On a recent Thursday, an argument broke out after one guy snapped at another. Alan took him aside to talk. "Before coming to TROSA, this guy probably would have thrown his tools down and gone to the bar," he said. During the hour-long conversation, the resident revealed that he was upset for reasons unrelated to work — he was missing home and his girlfriend. A recovered addict, Alan had known for many years what it was to avoid dealing with his feelings, instead turning to arguments and drugs.

Even though he had a deadline to meet and other jobs waiting, the hour conversation took priority. Alan does this, he said, several times a day with a number of residents. "That's what it's about here: helping people get through the day," he said. "'Let's just get through the day. You having a bad day? Tomorrow's going to be a better day. As long as you stay sober [and] stay focused.' That's what we're here for."

Half of the day at TROSA is spent this way in every department, whether it's construction or catering. But helping residents is not a purely selfless act. "It doesn't happen every day, but you'll be dealing with somebody and you see yourself," said Mike, head of TROSA Moving & Storage. "I see this youngster and he's thinking the same thing I was 10 years ago, and I know exactly where he's going to go if I can't convince him that this is what he needs to do and this is where he needs to stay. And it can be heartbreaking, really, because some of them won't listen. I didn't listen back then. And that happens. That's what gets to me a lot, recognizing myself in people."

Himself a former addict, Mike is responsible for the close to five thousand moving jobs TROSA handles every year. They have worked hard to take TROSA to the next level by generating enough revenue to pay the staff. Since arriving in 1997, the head of the moving company has increased the moving department's earnings from \$254,000 to over three million a year. On Sundays now, he often offers classes for the movers he supervises. "I hammer away more on honesty than I do on moving," he said. "It's very rare that we ever teach any moving procedures. Something might come up, but the bottom line is we're trying to train people how to be honest."

Such training pays off. Residents have the chance to work their way up in a supportive environment and can expect to earn ten or fifteen dollars an hour after graduation. This doesn't, however, mean that keeping a job is easy. While graduates may have ended a drug or alcohol habit, they don't have always have licenses to drive to their new jobs. In fact, an office at TROSA is dedicated to the paperwork and red tape of having drivers licenses reinstated. According to Kevin, "It's just the right thing to do." These graduates are also people he can tap for mentoring new residents.

As a business, however, graduation of residents means a high turnover rate. When an experienced plumber graduates, they cannot just hire another one. This makes TROSA one large training ground, Kevin contends, and the aftercare program is an important part of why people can succeed at TROSA. Kevin himself had a hard time getting a job after he finished his program. People didn't want to hire someone with a prison record or an admitted addiction, no matter how reformed he professed to be.

According to Kevin these details are the things people forget when they think about addiction. TROSA, he says, doesn't deal simply with problems of addiction. They deal with people holistically, with their medical, educational, and legal issues, sexual abuse trauma and mental illness, and anything else that might arise. "There's always a hundred problems a day. We've got a guy in the hospital right now that is dying. We've got another guy who just came in with syphilis in the eyes. He's been here like a week and already he's in the hospital," Kevin said. "People have no idea what it takes to run a program like this, what this staff does, and how much of themselves they put into it."

Residents with such medical problems are simply turned away at other therapeutic communities, but by building alliances with the Durham community, TROSA has made it possible to help addicts who are ill and living in poverty. Pairing up with Duke University Medical Center and Duke University Department of Psychiatry, TROSA developed a program that utilizes medical students to provide TROSA's residents with health care at no cost to TROSA. TROSA recently opened a medical clinic at its James Street facility. The new clinic has made it possible to expand the services TROSA offers to such hard to serve populations as those with dual and triple diagnoses. It's also a two-way street, according to TROSA board member and Program Administrator for Duke Addictions Program, Paul Nagy.

"One of the things we have not done a good a job of is educating our psychiatrists about substance abuse and giving them an opportunity really to understand addiction and understand treatment," said Paul. "The experiences they have had tend to skew them to believe that recovery is not possible. So it was critical that we offer our medical residents opportunities to experience people in recovery and see people get well and allow them to get involved with that process as part of their learning."

Such partnerships with the health community have been challenging for Kevin and TROSA. Most therapeutic communities are resistant to giving medication to residents suffering from psychiatric illness. But according to Paul, fifty percent of people who abuse drugs are grappling with mental health issues, whether it be depression, anxiety, or something more severe. Kevin, in his leadership role, has become incredibly open minded and trusting of the new approaches being used to treat substance abuse.

This openness has also led TROSA to working on gender-specific treatment with a Professor of Social Work at the University of North Carolina. Over the years, this professor has watched the women's group within TROSA grow to include 50 women. She has helped incorporate research findings into TROSA's admitting interview screening process, giving TROSA, and her, a better understanding of health issues, including sexual abuse. In the field of substance abuse, she states, the rate of sexual abuse is extremely high for women and learning more about this can lead to better treatment efforts.

For Kevin and the staff, an open approach to recovery is fundamental to TROSA, and it begins in the way residents present themselves. TROSA residents are encouraged to speak openly and honestly about themselves and their experiences with their heads held high and a direct gaze reflecting their unflinching frankness.

Randy. "I was a heroin addict for 30 years. I work in landscaping."

“My name is Gary. I work in warehouse security. For 25 years, my drug of addiction was heroin.”

“Hi, my name’s Sandra. I’ve been here since May and I work in the In-Kind department.”

“My name’s Buddy. I run the transportation department. I was a 30 year addict, 15 of those on crack.”

“I’m Noel. I work in Finance. I started using drugs and alcohol at age 12 and continued until my first day at TROSA just before my 30th birthday. I decided to stay after my graduation and in December I’ll receive my Bachelor’s degree in Business Administration.”

In telling their life stories this way, residents learn to confront shame and guilt about their pasts. “We’re so much open because we know each other stories,” Kevin said. These stories inspire new residents and those who have graduated and stay to work at TROSA, like Alan. “The reason I stay is because I want to keep the hope here. I’m not letting go of it. I mean, the hope, it’s like pouring out of the faucets around here,” he said.

This hope is evident to anyone who visits TROSA. The organization gives tours to individuals and organizations as a form of two-way education. Kevin wants outsiders to see that addicts are people and wants his residents to be comfortable with the community. “Different people have different perceptions of us,” he said. “You just can’t change some people’s beliefs. Others see the reality and turn their thinking around. Other people, well it depends on what day it is. But the real deal is, TROSA is a part of this community, no matter what. And our residents have to be able to interact with members of the community because one day they will join them.”

When it comes to gaining acceptance in the community, Kevin and the staff at TROSA have been creative in using their alliances. “It helps when you have a judge on your board of directors,” Kevin said with a laugh. But that’s exactly what happened when he and the staff attended a neighborhood association meeting. He showed up in a good suit and with a judge. TROSA had purchased a piece of property in the neighborhood and some residents were concerned about their new neighbors. “You have to pick your battlegrounds really carefully, and who you bring to the battle,” he said.

Having a judge and the approval of the chamber of commerce legitimizes the work TROSA does. It has nevertheless taken some time, and as Kevin acknowledges, acceptance comes by “word of mouth” as people see the work that is being done and tell others about it.

Surrounded by Durham’s biotech firms, colleges, and a weakened tobacco industry, TROSA has been able to buy inexpensive real estate. They now own and maintain 24 buildings, most of which they have had to renovate themselves. “People in the neighborhood that I didn’t even know would stop and tell us what a good job we was doing,” said Mac, master brick mason and 1998 graduate from TROSA. “Some of these houses were really in bad shape, so we get a lot of compliments about TROSA and it being a good program in teaching guys how to do the right thing.”

Bringing things back to life is at the heart of TROSA. Its own headquarters are located in a former dairy that Kevin and the staff secured and then made practical by employing a relatively little-known college and university zoning category. Just down the road on Roxboro Street there are 8 former crack houses transformed by TROSA into vibrant homes for program graduates. Another site is a warehouse complex filled with racks of suits and clothes for the residents to “shop in.” At Christmas time, residents come to shop for gifts to send their children. All of it signals the reality that TROSA must support itself. “We ain’t waiting for no manna from heaven, we’re going after it.” Kevin said, laughing.

The In-Kind department at TROSA contacts corporations for donations, everything from women’s underwear to conference tables. They have become known for sharing what they have with other nonprofits, whether it’s furniture or food. On one occasion, they even found themselves with three tractor-trailers filled with frozen chicken. They had solicited more than the Durham food bank could hold so they turned around and began giving the chicken to other non-profit organizations in town.

It is work like this that helps Randy feel he has a new family. “For all of them years I felt part of that gang and now I feel part of something else. A different type of gang, you know?” he said. “I don’t have to worry about getting killed in this gang.”

For a nonprofit organization, success in business is always accompanied by challenges. Kevin and the staff are beginning to feel their own limits. “How do we take on another project or join another task force and be consistent when we’re just surviving?” Kevin asks. Despite their financial success they are a business and always at risk. At one point, advancing insurance rates almost drove them out of business. Kevin wants to create a school at TROSA for those who want to learn how to replicate their work in other cities. One challenge that TROSA faces in doing this is raising the required capital necessary to pursue such an endeavor. Kevin also sees the need to continue training and supporting TROSA staff, trying to ensure that the organization continues to be a good place to work. He himself has just begun to take Saturdays off despite pangs of guilt. After years of working six days a week, every week, it is hard to let go. But life is changing for both him and the staff.

“I’ve got a family now. I’ve got a wife and two kids. I’ve got to be able to spend time with them,” he said. “And each person here is in different stages. Joe’s bought his first home. Tara just got married. Alan’s got a son, just moved down here. We’re all working hard to find a balance between work and family life. It is important for us to be role models as family members.”

Part of growing, according to Kevin, will mean that some people leave and others move up. It will mean making TROSA an even better place for its staff and residents. Kevin expects it to continue being a bumpy road but one that they will manage. He and the staff are used to dreaming big, coming up with creative solutions, and working with the resources they have.

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