

Parnell helps homeless

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Former homeless addict finds success running Healing Place.

By [Jennifer Whytock](#)

RALEIGH, N.C. [02.26.04] -- Eighteen years ago, Dennis Parnell was addicted to drugs and alcohol, and homeless on the streets of New Hampshire.

Now, he helps hundreds of men get through similar problems.

"I got into such a bad place with drugs and alcohol that my life collapsed," says Parnell, executive director of **The Healing Place of Wake County**.

"But if I could start over with my life," he says, "I wouldn't change anything because I like who I am and what my life is now, and that is a result of everything, both good and bad."

When he emerged from a halfway house in North Carolina nine months after hitting bottom in 1986, he decided to break his series of unsatisfying jobs and do something to make a difference.

He started counseling youth, then domestic-violence victims, and then worked in adolescent psychology before becoming a substance-abuse counselor, most recently at WakeMed hospital in Raleigh.

"When I was a substance-abuse specialist at WakeMed, I could convince people they needed help, but there was no place for them to go if they didn't have insurance," says Parnell.

So after he and other North Carolinians visited a successful homeless and substance-abuse program in Louisville, Ky., called **the Healing Place**, they brought the model to Wake, where it has flourished in the last five years.

"It was hard to give up a good job at WakeMed to go to a start up, but that forced me to work hard to make it work," says Parnell.

The first night **the Healing Place** opened its doors in 1999, only 13 men showed up, but under Parnell's leadership, the 180-bed facility soon was filled to capacity and now has a waiting list.



Dennis Parnell

Born: 1950, Bronx, N.Y.

Education: Undergraduate, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, New York City; Masters, Eastern Carolina University

Family status: Married, five children

Hardest part of job: Dealing with bureaucracy and status quo

Hardest thing in life: Decision to get sober, and recovery

Hobby: Cultivating Banzai trees

The multi-phase program, which averages nine months, brings men off the streets, takes them through a sobering-up program, provides a peer-to-peer recovery program, teaches them life skills and workplace skills, then helps them find a job and a home.

One year after completing the program, 72 percent of the 179 graduates have a job, a home and are sober, compared to an average success rate of 30 percent to 50 percent for 28-day treatment programs that are more common, says Parnell.

Research shows that the longer people get treatment, the better their chance of success, he says.

“My goal is to change people’s minds about substance abuse,” says Parnell. “People thought if you got too far down, you couldn’t come out of it, but you can. I want to show that it is a disease, not a weakness.”