



Serna Village, designed to give troubled people a second chance, is finding success.

Troubled people tell how resiliency program works for them

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Drug-addled. Homeless. Lawless. A couple of years ago, Tony Parker was hardly a poster boy for resilience.

"Thirty-five years of addiction," Parker said, stroking his scraggly white beard. "Thirteen years on the streets. My life was pretty much a shambles."

The same could be said for most of the people sitting around him Tuesday at Serna Village, a housing program for formerly homeless families.

One after the other, they offered slices of their turbulent lives. They talked about battling mental illness, abusing drugs and neglecting their children. Beatings at the hands of their spouses. Losing jobs and doing time and burning bridges with loved ones.

Once, people like them were considered hopeless causes, victims of their environments, their genetics or their choices, who could rarely be reformed. But today, in part because of a movement known as "resiliency," they are climbing their way back to lives of self-sufficiency and meaning.

"I think it's something that everyone has within them, regardless of whatever horrors they have experienced in their lives," Bonnie Benard, a national expert in resiliency, told Serna Village staffers and residents. "It's up to the rest of us to create the school, the community, the environment to allow them to succeed."

Unlike most rehabilitation programs, which zero in on people's problems, she said, resiliency focuses on finding hidden strengths and assets and using them to evoke change.

The nonprofit Serna Village at McClellan Park and its companion program, Quinn Cottages, are national models in the resiliency movement, said Benard, who holds workshops on the approach throughout the country.

"This program works," she said.

About 75 percent of the long-term housing program's adult residents, all of whom have been homeless and struggled with addictions, "graduate" having secured sobriety, housing and a stable income, said executive director Robert Tobin.

They must be "clean and sober" when they move in, and strive to remain so. They must have specific goals, from getting a high school certificate to attending college to starting a business. Staffers help them achieve those goals through counseling, classes, encouragement and friendship. Rules are developed and enforced mostly by residents, not administrators, said Tobin.

On Tuesday, some of those residents talked about what the housing program has meant to them.

"I've stopped running. I'm dealing with my problems," one said.

"I have a voice; I have strength," said another.

"I'm starting over," said a third.

Parker said he probably would have died on the streets if he had not found his way into the program. "I feel blessed," he said, his eyes filling with tears. He has been off drugs for nearly two years, and has dreams of opening a motorcycle repair shop.

"I had no idea what the word 'resiliency' even meant," said Lisa Alexander, who hopes one day to run a day care center. "All I knew how to do was survive. Coming here, I found out I had assets. I could learn, and become a leader, and give back."

Arla Helms just wants to stand on her own two feet for the first time, she said.

"The government always supported me and my children," she said. "It's time for me to get off my rump and do it for myself."

"The people here made me believe I could do it," she said. "I have a life today because of this program."