

Winn Freeman, Living Life rehabilitation program help addicts gain wisdom

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Nine years after Winn Freeman made a drug/alcohol training program his life ministry, the California native continues to get strange looks when he talks about the Wisdom in Living Life program.

“Our focus is not to teach people how to be clean and sober,” Freeman says.

“Drugs are the symptoms, not the real problem,” Freeman continues. “We deal with the problem.”

The 54-year-old Freeman, sometimes known in rehabilitation circles as “the drug guy,” deals with the issue each week in classrooms at a training facility near Travelers Rest. He typically spoke to 10-12 students when he began the ministry in 2000; today, a room of more than 100 is common for his “Choosing to be free” program each Thursday.

It is the oldest of three weekly programs offered at the training facility that once housed the Ebenezer

Elementary School. He and colleagues teach similar classes Monday and Tuesday evenings.

It is a fitting subject for Freeman, whose life was thrown into chaos as he developed drug dependency as a teenager. “Clean” for 21 years, he now speaks to drug users with authority.

“Sometimes it takes a person like me to convince someone that they can get their life back,” says Freeman. “If you want to work on a car, you don’t talk to a painter.”

In terms of drug knowledge, Freeman is a certified mechanic. “A good kid” who found himself in trouble when he began to experiment with alcohol and speed as early as age 11, Freeman dropped out of school and left home at age 15. In the next 17 years, he lived the life that many teenagers dream about – playing guitar in a Bakersfield, Calif., rock band that traveled from city to city. It was a lifestyle that made illegal drugs easy to find.

Freeman saw his family life and two careers crumble under the weight of alcohol and drug addictions. His younger brother, Aaron, died as the result of a heroin overdose.

Freeman “hit bottom” at age 32, when, from the back seat of a police car, Freeman began his recovery with a transformation to the Christian faith.

In a nutshell, that’s the foundation of Freeman’s program today. He calls it a “Christian, Bible-based

alternative” to more conventional drug treatment programs.

In fact, Freeman never refers to his program as one offering treatments. His is a non-



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denominational, faith-based program that offers a cure.

Rather than approach the dependency as a disease, Freeman says it is crucial to tackle the issue of addiction as a spiritual problem. It’s the key to hope, he believes, which in itself is part of the cure.

“Getting people off drugs is the easy part,” Freeman says. “The hard part is getting that person into life – with a job and integrity.”

Another element that makes Wisdom in Living Life markedly different than traditional drug/alcohol treatment centers is the modest cost. Group services are offered for a free-will

donation. Private services, such as counseling, are available on a fee basis in consideration of the ability of the recipient to compensate the ministry for costs related to the service provided.

The Wisdom in Living Life Web site at www.wisdominlivinglife.org offers a video that includes the stories of successful alumni. Freeman says 71 percent of his clients remain drug-free one year after completing the program.

"We do have an answer. We do have a cure," Freeman says, adding that his program doesn't usually attract clients "until they've tried everything else."

"I'm offering a real solution," says Freeman. "Only after a change of heart can there be a change of behavior."

The nonprofit organization began as a vision when Freeman served six years as director of the

Greenville Rescue Mission. He started the Overcomers program there, which helps men recover from addictions.

In 2000, Freeman stepped out to start the Wisdom in Living Life program.

An expanded program is on the horizon. WILL is scheduled to make the transition to a permanent residence hall – Beyond Recovery – in the next year. With the ability to immerse clients in the program for weeks at

a time, Freeman foresees an improved success rate.

Thanks to a huge donation by Travelers Rest businessman Jim Anthony and the support of several area churches, Freeman looks forward to the construction of a \$2.5 million facility in northern Greenville County near Travelers Rest that will enable the program to help clients more efficiently.

"I think we're going to be pushing dirt in the next couple of weeks," says Freeman of the planned 13,000-square-foot, 40-bed facility, which he hopes will be open by August 2010 – exactly 10 years after the program began. A more realistic target is late 2010.

The permanent home for the program has been made possible by the contributions of Anthony, who donated a 50-acre site, and others. Among recent major contributors are DeVita Associates, who provided engineering and architectural services; and Payne McGinn & Cummins, a Travelers Rest contractor that has donated road-building and earth-moving services.

Freeman hopes to raise at least another \$3 million for the next phase of construction, which includes a facility for women. Thanks to Freeman's pay-as-you-go philosophy, the ministry has no debt.

Freeman's path to full-time ministry began in 1990, when he concluded that few clergymen were poorly equipped to deal with the growing problem. At the advice of a friend in California, Freeman enrolled at Greenville's Holmes Bible College. At the end of his senior year, Freeman received the school's highest award, the N.J. Holmes Award.

He began working at the Rescue Mission the same year, and was selected as director of the mission shortly after his college graduation in 1994.

After working with recovering addicts for 15 years, Freeman shows no signs of burnout.

"Staying motivated isn't a problem," Freeman says. "I guess it's because I know what I'm here for. That puts wind in your sails every day."