

Mentors set drug addicts back on their feet

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After a life of drugs and jail, their quiet lifestyle feels good to Tim and Carolyn Jones. But it might not have happened without intense support from a group of committed volunteers.

"There's no more drama, no more emptiness inside," said Tim Jones, beaming through a greying mustache. "This has meant everything. I've never had anyone do something like this for me."

A drug addict for 32 years, Tim ended up in the Dubuque County Jail, then in drug court alongside his wife of eight years. The newly released couple was paired with a volunteer mentor from Archdiocese of Dubuque Catholic Charities Jail and Prison Ministries program, who accompanied them to drug court, drove them to appointments, helped them navigate local social service agencies and found money to help get them into their own apartment.

"I was raised Baptist, but I thought to myself, 'Them Catholics are crazy good,'" Tim said laughing.

The mentoring program has earned state and national awards for its success at reducing recidivism among former prisoners. It is a simple concept based on restorative justice -- repairing harm to society done by crime and helping offenders become productive members of society. Trained mentors pair up with those newly released from jail to help them get back on their feet.

"We find out their needs and give them short-term help while we work together on getting other parts of their lives stabilized," explained Deacon Bill Hickson, program coordinator.

That help could include anything from a rent deposit or a gas card to a pair of work boots or some basic furniture. The fund often pays for a month's supply of critical medication to tide the person over until some form of insurance kicks in. The "direct aid fund" is supported by private donations, "loose-change collections" in churches of various denominations and by the monks at New Melleray Abbey.

Recently, Mercy Medical Center-Dubuque, through its Community Benefit program, gave a grant of \$1,750 to ease medical expenses.

In the Joneses' case, their mentor and the fund provided medicine (after Tim had a heart attack and surgery), rides to various appointments, a heating pad to soothe Carolyn's arthritic muscles and even marriage counseling sessions.

"It saved our marriage. Now we get along for the right reasons," Carolyn said. "I feel mentally and emotionally stabilized now." Both Tim and Carolyn found jobs.

"When I got out (of jail), I hated everybody," Tim said. "Then they offered to help us, and it overwhelmed me. I had given up on God after my sister died when I was 11, but now I'm

re-examining that God thing because of them."

Hickson is inspired by his own religion when he reaches out to struggling ex-prisoners.

"These two are successful, and a lot of people in drug court look up to them, so they are ... doing good for others," he said.