

Phoenix House director, addict-turned-advocate, honored for helping others recover

By Angel Coker

Staff Writer

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Ronnie Colvin's theory is that one addict is best suited to help another overcome a substance abuse disorder.

Colvin has been the executive director of Phoenix House, a residential treatment center in Tuscaloosa, for more than 20 years and went through Phoenix House himself to battle an alcohol and drug addiction.

Colvin has been recognized by the state after years of service in the substance abuse field through Phoenix House, advocacy before the Legislature to obtain more funding for substance abuse and volunteering his time to train peers as lay people to help others with recovery.

The Alabama Department of Mental Health created the McLemore-Colvin Award to honor Colvin and his peer Mike McLemore, director of McLemore Consulting, a drug and alcohol rehab facility in Eva, a town in Morgan County.

"I feel like getting an award from your peers is the greatest recognition you can get," Colvin said. "When you work with clients in a treatment center, you very seldom get thanks, but working with peers ... they're real appreciative."

Pam Butler, coordinator of recovery resources for the Alabama Department of Mental Health, said Colvin has set the example for other workers, advocates and volunteers in the substance abuse field.

"We created this award because Mike and Ronnie have done so much. They received the award because substance abuse is one of those diseases (where) people do the bare minimum. Ronnie and Mike have never let up," Butler said.

Colvin began his journey about 30 years ago. He received treatment for substance abuse and was placed in recovery at Phoenix House.

He became a certified drug counselor in 1985 and again in 1994 before becoming the executive director of Phoenix House.

Phoenix House serves 40 recovering addicts at a time, providing them a place to stay so they don't return to a "user" environment, and rent is based on income, which includes three meals a day and transportation to and from work and appointments for up to three months.

The men and women at Phoenix House take classes, attend counseling and find stable jobs in an effort to rejoin society.



Submitted photo

From left, Mike McLemore, Pam Butler and Ronnie Colvin, director of the Phoenix House in Tuscaloosa. Colvin and McLemore were honored with the McLemore-Colvin Award. Butler, coordinator of recovery resources for the Alabama Department of Mental Health, said Colvin has set the example for other workers, advocates and volunteers in the substance abuse field.

Colvin said about 8 percent of people who come to the Phoenix House have jobs already, but about 87 percent leave with jobs.

But the Phoenix House operates on a nearly nothing budget provided by the state, he said.

He said the Legislature doesn't want to fund substance abuse resources. Colvin and McLemore formed the advocacy group FORMLL, Friends of Recovery, Morgan, Madison, Lawrence, Limestone, Cullman and Randolph counties, in 2008 to petition the Legislature for more funding.

"It's a struggle for us to help these people with the lack of funding we have in this state," Colvin said.

He said of an almost \$9 million mental health budget that is split among three divisions — mental illness, developmental disabilities and substance abuse — substance abuse receives about 1.5 percent of the funds.

But treatment is cheaper, Colvin said.

He said for every dollar spent on substance abuse treatment, there is a \$7 return because tax payers aren't paying to house addicts in jail or paying their medical bills, and treated addicts are able to contribute by getting jobs and paying taxes.

However, the stigma attached to recovering addicts and laws make it difficult for them to get jobs, housing, food stamps and other resources so they can function in society again.

"These are not bad people. They just have bad behavior because of their disease," Colvin said. "The reason it's best for addicts to help other addicts is because we don't judge them. We don't attach a stigma to them. We have a better understanding of what they've been through."

He said the big fight is getting others who have not experienced substance abuse to recognize the problem and do something about it.

Colvin has spent decades of his life fighting for that cause.

"We need more Mikes and Ronnies," Butler said.

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