

Redwood Gospel Mission

Faith-based finalists: Boot camp for souls in pursuit of insanity | *David Sessions*



Gary Fong/Genesis Photo Agency

SANTA ROSA, Calif.—John Nutting first met Santa Claus at the San Francisco Yacht Club. The son of an international banker from the bay area, he was accustomed to the taste of the silver spoon. His parents divorced when he was 11 and he tried marijuana at 16. He entered his first of nine rehab programs at 18.

By his mid-30s, Nutting was operating a successful con business on the streets of San Francisco: "I created an Australian persona, and would walk up to strangers and tell them I was from Sydney." He got the story down to a science: "I got some nice clothes, and said I was staying across the bay, and some guy I met took me to his famous restaurant in the Tenderloin—people's eyes always widened because they knew that was the bad part of town—where his henchmen ran off with my wallet." In three years with that act, fake cards and all, Nutting says he hauled in about \$400,000—and every cent went into "cheap hotels, crack cocaine, and a pursuit of insanity."

A heart failure last December led to open-heart surgery and his arrival at Santa Rosa's Redwood Gospel Mission the next day, surgical tape still holding his chest together. "I thought it was a drug and alcohol treatment center, but it's really more of a Jesus boot camp," Nutting said. Now, he compares his first apprehensive childhood meeting with Santa to his introduction to Christ. "My mom stood behind me, telling me, 'It's OK, it's OK, Santa's just going to hug you,' nudging me closer. That's how it was when I got here, as my counselor and everyone else tried to introduce me to Jesus. And then, next thing I knew, my thinking and my life were starting to change."

Transformation is the central principle of Redwood's New Life program, a 10-month, three-phase treatment for men and women recovering from addiction. "We want to teach people that life is about accountability," said Jeff Gilman, the mission's executive director. "Compassion that doesn't address the stewardship issues that caused the problem is no compassion at all." During a 30-day candidacy period, Redwood staffers evaluate disposition and willingness to change.

Once in the program, members progress through three sections of treatment, each with its own scripture memorization and Alcoholics Anonymous step requirements. Along with participating in the mission's various work squads, they attend Bible studies and take classes on life skills like anger management. If they haven't graduated from high school, they need a GED to graduate from the program, so some take literacy classes and test prep.

Program members currently number 40 men and 14 women, housed and treated at separate locations. The program's explicitly Christian methodology attempts to bring out the original scriptural basis of the 12-step program, although some Santa Rosans are skeptical about anything Christian. Nestled in the mountains north of the bay area and the heart of its famous wine country, Santa Rosa has blue blood running in its veins.

"Homeless animals are higher on the government's priority list than homeless people," Gilman laughed, wishing it were a joke. The city's left-wing political and social allegiances leave it suspicious of a ministry that goes beyond feeding and clothing. "People here can't really get into the transformational aspect," Gilman said. But as New Life graduates rehabilitated citizens—an estimated 300 to date—it is slowly establishing trust with county judges and local social workers.

New Life graduates staff the men's headquarters, housed in an aging gray building in downtown Santa Rosa. In the morning the men clean floors, prepare food, unload trucks, and work at Redwood's thrift superstore. (The women take the store's afternoon shifts.) Classes and meetings commence after lunch hour, during which most of the guys wolf down their portions so they can catch a nap or extra study time. They usually head for the building's upstairs, divided into various-sized dorm rooms that award increasing luxury as they advance in the program.

The graduates on staff have a lingering affection for the mission. Doug Garrett graduated from the program in 2005 and became Redwood's staff chef: "I grew up cooking with my Grandma, and always loved it." Now, his duties range from coming up with ways to cook 4,000 pounds of chicken to reinforcing what the program members hear from their counselors: "I try to be very soft-spoken, but also firm. I'm really one of them."

Don Cobb is a recovered alcoholic and a well-studied rock musician. His composition, "The Berry Market Boogie," was named "Best Jingle in Northern California" in 1996. As director of the New Life men's division, he brings his eye for aesthetics to everything he does at Redwood. He has created a small garden in the courtyard behind the mission ("we needed some life around here"), critiqued the condition of the upstairs carpet ("it was supposed to be changed a few weeks ago"), and organized the men into the "Redwood Gospel Mission Choir," which performs Cobb's original songs at area churches. They often sing his favorite, a cheesy rewrite of "The Can-Can," at Redwood events such as "phasings," informal ceremonies that mark members' progression to the next phase.

Meetings that vary from celebratory phasings to get-your-act-together house meetings are central to the collegial, fraternity-like feel of the men's program. The men often refer to themselves as "brothers" and make much of "self-evals." These are one-page forms brothers fill out when they spot an infraction of the rules or believe a brother needs correction. They are called "self-

evaluations," even though someone else writes them, because the point is to help the recipient assess his own character. Counselors review and approve self-evaluations before the men discuss them in a house meeting.

One brother named Reggie, a tall, taciturn African-American, received a self-evaluation for sleeping on his bunk and purportedly missing scheduled responsibilities. As the men quibbled over whether or not the missed activities were mandatory on that particular day, Cobb gently reminded them to focus on heart issues. "You may not find this criticism helpful," he told Reggie. "Take what you can, forget the rest. But take a serious look if you think they show a pattern of behavior."

Cobb said the self-evaluations play an important role in undoing the street-learned survival mentality that renders some men so defensive they retort even when complimented. Most of the brothers eventually seem to begin to overlook the others' faults. "You have to sort between the good advice and the worldly," one said privately. Another informed me with a wry grin that a particular counselor with an abrasive personality is "frequently at the top of our most-wanted list."

But no one spoke a cross word about Don Cobb, whom the brothers clearly admire as both a literal and a spiritual rock star. At the last phasing of the week, Cobb prepared the "choir" for its next performance, slated to be a big one. "It's com'n for to carry me home, not com-ing for to carry," he demonstrated in his gruff rock singing voice, strumming vigorously to emphasize the correct rhythm. "Com'n, not com-ing."

After the men rehearsed their set list and prayed over that day's one phaser, Cobb addressed the group again, this time in his kindly baritone speaking voice. "I know the enemy whispers in every single man's ear every freaking day. But I guarantee you that if you stay in your seat, 10 months from now, you will walk out of here a different man than you came in."

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