

For addicts, a bridge to recovery

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Aletha McDougle was drunk and strung out on crack for three years. She prostituted herself for drugs and suffered countless beatings at the hands of men she barely knew, living from pillow to post.

She checked into drug rehabilitation programs "just to rest," but she was never free of dope for more than a week.

Seven months ago, McDougle, 27, came to Emmaus House in Harlem, a live-in community of former substance abusers who support themselves by running the program and helping others come clean.

The 60 residents work as cooks, outreach coordinators and janitors 35 hours each week. They undergo individual therapy and attend classes at night. All must be sober.

"I'm learning about myself and how to take care of myself and my commu-



The Rev. David Kirk

nity," said McDougle, who is entering her second semester as a business major at Touro College in Harlem. She also works as a cook at Emmaus 35 hours a week.

The idea that the poor take responsibility for themselves has been touted recently by public figures from Jesse Jackson to Rush Limbaugh. But the philosophy is hardly new to the people of Emmaus House, who have been living it for more than 20 years.

"The welfare system is set up for dependency," said the Rev. David Kirk, who founded Emmaus in 1966. "Somehow the right to a shelter has become the issue over the years, and somehow it's good enough to give someone a meal and a cot. People have so many problems — it's not just a question of housing."

Making progress

No one understands this better than Gregory Burt. After 10 years of smoking crack and living in a cardboard shantytown under the Brooklyn Bridge, Burt checked himself into Beth Israel Medical Center's drug-treatment program. He moved to Emmaus House six months later.

Burt, 37, began at Emmaus cleaning toilets. Now, two years later, he runs the food pantry and shelter outreach program, which places residents in outside treatment programs. Although Burt is confident he is over his addiction, he is not ready to live on his own.

"One day when I feel I won't have to come back through the system ... I won't have to be on welfare and take a lower-paying job," Burt said.

Emmaus House, at Lexington Ave.

and 124th St., began as a Christian community that fed and sheltered street people. But after touring the Emmaus communities of Europe, where he watched the poor build homes and generate their own income, Kirk realized his methods were only perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

Today, Emmaus House serves as a bridge community between homelessness and independence.

"It isn't for everybody, but I think it's for a good piece of the homeless population," said Kirk, 58. "If you move people from the street or a shel-

ter to housing, you set them up for failure."

Kirk said 82% of residents move to permanent homes and jobs and that about 15 people are turned away each week because of a lack of resources. He attributed the program's success to individual attention and a sense of family, a first for many residents.

Emmaus House is named after a Biblical town outside Jerusalem where strangers came together to find hope after the death of Jesus. "We come together as strangers and try to become brothers and sisters," Kirk said.

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