

# Henrico County jail's program uses AA model

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**James W Houck (left), a contemporary of Alcoholics Anonymous founder Bill Wilson, chatted last night with Henrico Sheriff Mike Wade, who has implemented a program called *Back to Basics* to help county inmates with substance abuse problems.**

High on cocaine, lashing out at all in his path, Nate was not a pleasant character when he was arrested two years ago on charges of possession, evading and assaulting a police officer.

"That was my rock bottom is what I'd call it. I lost my wife, I lost my car and I lost my kids."

Nate — just Nate in true Alcoholics Anonymous fashion — “graduated” two months ago from Henrico County Jail after serving seven months in the county’s total-immersion substance abuse program.

The program, instituted two years ago by Sheriff Mike Wade and called ***Back to Basics***, relies heavily on principles developed when Alcoholics Anonymous was founded in 1935.

Wade took that stripped-down AA model, devoted an entire pod at Henrico’s Jail East facility in New Kent and created a total-immersion environment for inmates that shows promise.

“All my life, I’ve been thinking that the world was against me,” said Nate. “But . . . 95 percent of the problem was me.”

Now he’s working, living with his son and parents, still talking with his ex-wife and visiting with his daughter often.

Today Nate works full time at a local manufacturing facility and pays his parents rent to live in their home in Richmond’s North Side.

His son lives with him. He enjoys frequent visits with his daughter from his second marriage. He and his wife, who he said he lost that night two years ago, are permanently separated.

“I was damn near begging my wife to give me a second chance,” said Nate, who struggled through the divorce while behind bars. “But she taught me a valuable lesson.”

Nate says he talks and thinks a lot these days about the lessons he learned while behind bars. But more importantly, he talks about what he learned about himself.

Which is all he needed all along, said James W. Houck.

Among the AA initiated, Houck’s name is fast gaining legendary status. He was a contemporary of AA’s founder, Bill Wilson. The two attended meetings of the Oxford Group together during the mid-1930s. Their sobriety dates are just a day apart— 67 years ago last December.

“The idea is always to narrow the gap between what we believe and the way we live,” said Houck, who will tour the Jail East substance abuse program today, speaking and giving encouragement to men who spiritually are not much different than he was back in 1934. “Sometimes that gap can be pretty big.”

"I started drinking when I was 5 years old," said Houck, who is 96 and as devoted to his spiritual message as ever.

When he discovered Wade's jail program, Houck, who lives in Towson, MD, was delighted: "I think it's ideal because no one else is doing this. I don't know of anyone who's doing this except for Mike," he said

Wade's motive was practical when he instituted the program.

"My goal has always been to give each of these individuals the opportunity to change their own lives. And the only one who can make that change is them," Wade said. "But after two years with the program with 30-plus guys and zero fights — to me, that's success."

AA programs in the jails are common, Houck said. But where the Henrico program differs is that it does not rely simply on modern AA models. The modern program involves a laborious process, a long, written essay and has only about a 10 percent success rate.

***Back to Basics*** condenses many of AA's principles into a digestible nugget presented in a classroom format. It boasts a 70 percent to 80 percent recovery rate.

The problem with the modern approach, Houck said, is that many people enroll in AA only to make someone else happy; their wife, or a judge. "But if you take God out of AA, you have absolutely nothing."

Nate, for one, wants more.

"I've been working seven days a week since I got home. It's paying off and I'm starting to see a little light," he said.

"Am I happy? That's a good question. Right now, I wouldn't consider myself being happy because I don't have my family the way that I want them," Nate said. "But I would consider myself blessed."

Blessed and aware that it's the man who makes the choices, but it's also the choices that make the man.

"I'm making my own decisions now," Nate said.

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