

Oxford Houses and My Road to Recovery

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At the age of 29 I had to face the stark reality that I was an addict. I was raised in Durham, North Carolina, where my father was a professor of sociology at Duke University, and my mother worked in the Duke Office of Cultural Affairs. After I graduated from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in 1986, my addiction to alcohol and drugs began to spiral out of control, and I was facing serious legal problems. Since I still had health insurance I was able to go to an inpatient treatment hospital, then to a superior outpatient treatment program, but I found myself with no safe place to live. Out of desperation I decided to try an Oxford House; I had heard that these were places where recovery without relapse was the norm. A new Oxford House for women had just opened in Raleigh and I decided to apply. I went to the interview and was accepted. This one act may have saved my life. I was able to live with other individuals in recovery, consult with them on all decisions affecting my life, participate in 12-step meetings, and stay as long as I needed, which in my case was about two years. Today, almost 16 years later, I am still sober.

The first Oxford House was founded in Silver Spring, Maryland, in 1975 when a group of recovering alcoholics and drug addicts took over the county-run halfway house that was closing. The idea was simple—to provide a safe and supportive environment for individuals recovering from alcoholism and drug addiction for as long as it took to maintain sobriety. The house was run democratically with elected house officers and regular house meetings. Each house member agreed to pay an equal share of house expenses, and members agreed to immediately expel any member who relapsed. Today there are more than 1,300 Oxford Houses, including 127 Oxford Houses in North Carolina. The houses today follow the same system of operation that was established in the first house.

The concept underlying self-run, self-supported recovery houses is the same as the one underlying Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous—addicted individuals can help

themselves by helping each other abstain from alcohol and drug use one day at a time for the time that is sufficient for sobriety to become comfortable enough to avoid relapse. The typical Oxford House has 8-15 residents. When a vacancy occurs, house members interview prospective candidates and vote on whether to admit them. Once admitted, a resident may stay as long as he or she believes necessary if they maintain sobriety and pay their equal share of household expenses—about \$100 a week. Some house members stay a few months while others stay for years. The length of time needed for stable sobriety varies with each individual.

Beginning in 1989, the small network of 13 Oxford Houses in the Washington, DC began expansion throughout the country as a result of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1988.^a Since expansion began, the National Institute on Drug Addiction (NIDA) and the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) have funded extensive research that shows the success Oxford House has in providing people addicted to drugs and alcohol the opportunity to stay sober without relapse. Not only have the studies shown that living in Oxford Houses improves primary treatment outcomes for recovering alcoholics and drug addicts but that they work equally well for individuals with dual diagnoses.^b For the last 15 years, I have worked for Oxford House, Inc.—the national nonprofit umbrella organization for all Oxford Houses—to help expand the North Carolina network of Oxford Houses from the 22 Oxford Houses in the state in 1992, when I moved in, to the 127 that exist today. Someday I hope we will have enough Oxford Houses in the state to give every recovering addict the same opportunity I had to become comfortable enough in recovery to avoid relapse. I will continue to work with the 941 current residents in North Carolina Oxford Houses to look for more safe houses where recovery without relapse is the norm. **NCMJ**

a 42 USC § 300x-25.

b One important study is: Majer JM, Jason LA, Ferrari JR, North CS. Comorbidity among Oxford House residents: a preliminary outcome study. *Addict Behav.* 2002;27(5):837-845. Many of the DePaul Studies funded by the NIDA and NIAAA are available at <http://www.oxfordhouse.org/Publications/Evaluation/DePaul> and more specific information regarding this study may be found online at <http://condor.depaul.edu/~ljasen/oxford/index.html>.

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