

FIRST Offers A Second Shot at Life

By MARK R. ROSS
Chronicle Staff Writer

On the night of the games, you're allowed to curse and shout and get out of your system whatever it is that's bothering you. No holds are barred, so you can vent your spleen about anything, or anyone.

When the games are over, however, you must go about your daily activities and deal with your fellow resident on a level completely devoid of the acrimony displayed during the games.

The games are the twice-weekly group sessions used by the residents of the Forsyth Initiative for Residential Self-Help Treatment (FIRST).

The program is run from an old renovated house in a residential area, 301 Spring St. FIRST, which has been in existence for less than two years, recently purchased and is in the process of renovating another old home across the street. FIRST is a two-year program for drug-abusing ex-convicts. The program is modeled after the better known Delancey Street program, which has a facility in Greensboro.

Mary Hogden, FIRST's director, is a graduate of Delancey Street and helped to establish the Greensboro facility.

"It's a tough program for tough people," Hogden said about FIRST. "We practice tough love."

Hogden, a feisty, no-nonsense woman, explained that FIRST got start-up money from several local foundations. In three to five years, FIRST hopes to be completely self-sufficient, she said.

The games, residents said, are one of the prime reasons for the changes in their lives.

"You can call it an attack session," said resident Ollie Hooker. "Most of the time (the residents) are angry with themselves. The games are a chance to say what you want to say and let him see what he's doing wrong. We don't apologize during the games."

"If two or three people say the



Mary Hogden (left) with members of FIRST.

same thing, it's got to be real," said Lynetta Jackson, another resident.

Hooker and Jackson are both ex-convicts with lengthy police records. Besides their run-ins with the law, what they also have in common with the other 31 residents is that they are recovering alcoholics or drug addicts.

On a recent weekday morning the house was abuzz with people preparing to leave for their various jobs. Everyone has a responsibility, and if money is earned it goes towards the cost of maintaining the facility. Two residents are currently working in the mailroom at Integon Insurance Corp. A group of residents are involved in selling Christmas trees and poinsettias. Another group is charged with making the new house habitable.

Jackson works in the office doing telemarketing and helps in the kitchen.

Jackson's story is typical of the others. The 37-year-old started using drugs in her late teens and to support her habit she began stealing. She also acted as a drug courier, moving drugs from Atlanta to North Carolina. Her record earned her a 10-year sentence for felonious larceny, her last conviction.

Jackson and other FIRST residents said that the 30-day drug rehabilitation programs offered by the prison system just don't work. When she found out about FIRST, she wrote Hogden a letter - all candi-

dates for residency have to write a letter expressing their interest in getting in the program.

For Jackson, the transition wasn't easy.

"They told me I was going to have to work 18 hours a day," Jackson said. "I said, 'Eighteen hours a day! . . . You learn to appreciate a lot of things around here' like sleep, she said, laughing.

The program at FIRST involves mastering stages. The first one, the preppy stage, is a 30-45 day session in learning responsibility by doing such menial things as washing the walls of the house. The new resident's day starts at 6:30 a.m. and stops at midnight. The next three stages are underclassman, upper-classman and graduate student, with each one representing more responsibility. Before graduating, the resident is required to earn a high-school diploma and to learn three skills that will help him get a job.

"Two years is not a long time considering what I was doing," said Edgar Davis, 46, who was arrested and jailed for stealing his mother's car, which he drove to make a drug buy.

As important as the games are in venting steam, equally as important are the residents themselves and the way they relate to each other.

"The success of the program depends on the residents," said Hogden.



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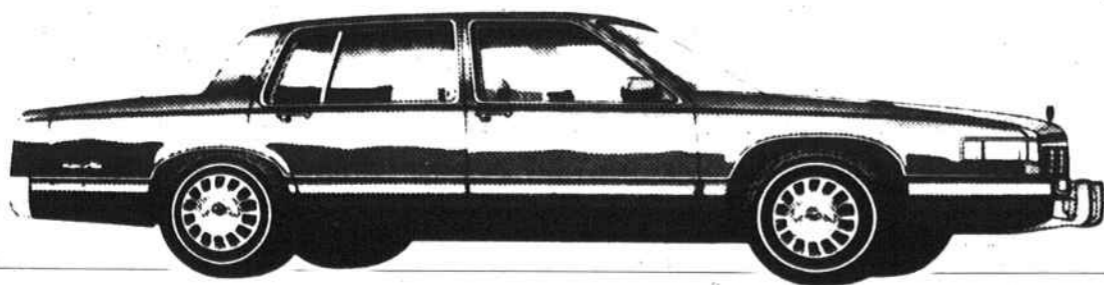


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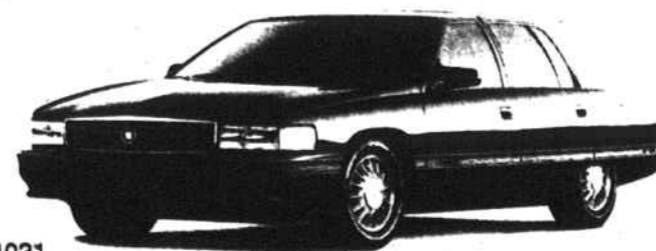
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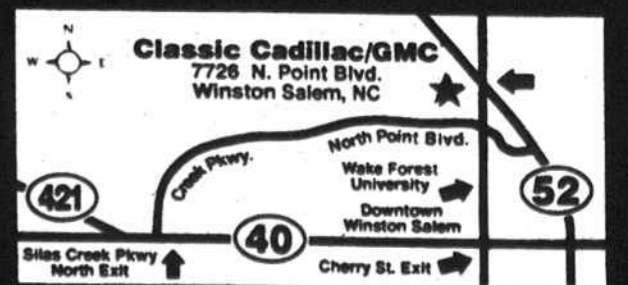
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