



# Project COPE helps young adults overcome addiction



By PAUL HALLORAN

Despite using illegal drugs for 10 years, Jason Johnson had managed to avoid any serious criminal charges – until he was pulled over on the Lynnway nine months ago.

Ironically, the pills Johnson had in his car that night were Suboxone, a drug used to treat heroin addiction, which he has been fighting for several years. The problem was that Johnson, who had unsuccessfully tried to get a prescription, had obtained the pills illegally.

“I was trying to do it on my own,” Johnson said of his attempt to overcome drug addiction. “I couldn’t get an appointment with a doctor until I was recommended for the program; then I got an appointment right away.”

The program to which Johnson referred is Young Adult Diversion, a joint venture between the office of Essex District Attorney Jon Blodgett and Project COPE, a Lynn-based agency that offers a range of services for individuals experiencing problems due to alcohol and drug abuse.

The Young Adult Diversion program provides an opportunity for first-time, non-violent offenders to receive the treatment and services they need and, if they fulfill all requirements, avoid a criminal record. The DA’s office selects participants and refers them to Project COPE, which has two full-time clinical case managers who work closely with them.

“I strongly believe in the drug diversion program,” Blodgett said. “I would much rather help a young person charged with simple possession overcome their drug addiction and become a productive member of the community than send him or her to jail.”

Johnson, 25, who is close to completing the program, could not agree more. “Anyone I know who has gone to jail for drugs comes out and does the same thing,” he said.

Those referred to the diversion program are typically age 18-26 and they stay in it for 4-6 months on average. Rob Gonzalez and fellow case manager Kristen Cejka handle up

to 20 cases at a time, working out of seven courthouses in Essex County.

Johnson, whose parents were both addicts, started smoking marijuana when he was 14 and was experimenting with painkillers within a few years. He moved on to heroin and was actually being treated with methadone by the time he was 19, but he relapsed and was thrown out of the program. That eventually led him to the Suboxone.

Since entering the diversion program, Johnson has met with his case manager, Gonzalez, weekly and submitted to weekly urine tests. He attends NA meetings as well as other support groups. He works full-time at Stop & Shop and has a good relationship with his 7-year-old daughter.

“I didn’t want her to have the same life I did (growing up),” he said.

Johnson is one of the many success stories about which Gonzalez and Cejka can rightly feel proud. They estimate that about 90 percent of those who enter the diversion program complete it successfully, thanks in part to their willingness to do whatever it takes to get participants on the right track.

“Everyone has a different treatment plan,” said Cejka, noting that COPE staff offer a variety of services both in-house and in the community including intensive out patient, residential, detoxification, medication management and counseling.

The case managers work very closely with Blodgett’s staff and submit weekly reports on everyone in the diversion program.

“The key to the program is we have a great working relationship with the DA’s staff,” Cejka said. “They are incredibly invested in the people that come into the program.”

Johnson will tell you it is a wise investment.

“I was trying to do it by myself,” he said, “but I wasn’t doing it the right way. This was the kick in the butt I needed to get started on the right path.”

To learn more about Project COPE, please visit [www.projectcope.com](http://www.projectcope.com).

Rob Gonzalez, Kristen Cejka and Ruth Budelmann run the Young Adult Diversion program, a collaboration of Project COPE and the office of the Essex District Attorney.

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

*“I had lost all faith in myself. Then I was introduced to Rob G. through the drug diversion program. He gave me hope and insight to a life that I didn’t think was possible for me ... Today I have goals, real relationships, a steady job, and a truly grateful heart.”*

*“This program has put a lot of things in perspective for me. I have found a way of living life without the use of drugs ... I’ve learned to appreciate life in its natural form. I am also thankful for my freedom.”*

*“Four months ago I never thought my life would be where I am today ... This program has given me my life back and I will be forever grateful.”*

## All Care VNA is building for future

ALL CARE: from Page 1

“I commend everyone at All Care for the great work that they do,” said State Sen. Thomas M. McGee. “It’s about helping people and caring for people, and those services are so important. I also commend the agency for bringing together an empty lot and creating opportunities for the downtown and the waterfront.”

All Care broke ground on the site in December 2010. The property, adjacent to the MBTA commuter rail station and bus terminal at Market and Broad streets, had been vacant for more than two decades before All Care stepped in.

“This kind of project doesn’t happen overnight,” said Jay Fenton, All Care board chairman. “It took a lot of time and a lot of energy, but I think it’s indicative of the agency’s continued loyalty to the city.”

“All Care is a Lynn-based organization and our board members are committed to maintaining that presence in the city,” said All Care President Shawn Potter. “Probably half of our patients live in Lynn, and about 250 of our employees are Lynn residents. We’re here to stay.”

Specializing in caring for individuals recovering from illness and injury, helping elders maintain their health and independence and providing compassionate end-of-life care, All Care serves patients in 53 communities throughout Greater Boston and the North Shore. It provides these services to its patients regardless of their ability to pay, and, in the past 10 years, the agency has provided \$2.5 million in free or subsidized care.

Much of the funding to help those in need of quality home and hospice care is derived from donor support and the

proceeds of events such as All Care’s annual wine tasting and auction. This year’s event, the 10th annual “A Matter of Taste,” will be held on Nov. 17. Last year, more than 300 guests helped to raise a record-breaking \$100,000 that directly benefited those with life-limiting illnesses in the communities All Care serves.

To be an event sponsor, donate auction items or purchase tickets, call 781-246-8988 or visit [www.allcare.org](http://www.allcare.org).

Join All Care as we celebrate our  
10th Annual Charity Wine Tasting & Auction  
*“A Matter of Taste”*  
Thursday, November 17 ~ 6:00 to 9:30 pm  
Danversport Yacht Club ~ \$60.00 pp  
Enjoy fine wine & beer tastings, sumptuous hors d’oeuvres,  
pasta & carving stations, & desserts.

For information: 800.246.2449 x119 ~ [jchamberlin@allcare.org](mailto:jchamberlin@allcare.org) [www.allcare.org](http://www.allcare.org)  
Come support All Care VNA & Hospice – your community home health care provider for over 100 years