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The Sobering Crusade of Mickey Evans

A Way Out For Addicts

THE SOBERING CRUSADE MICKEY EVANS

Alcohol and drug addiction has reached epidemic proportions. But this cowboy preacher has an answer that works. One by one he is changing lives.

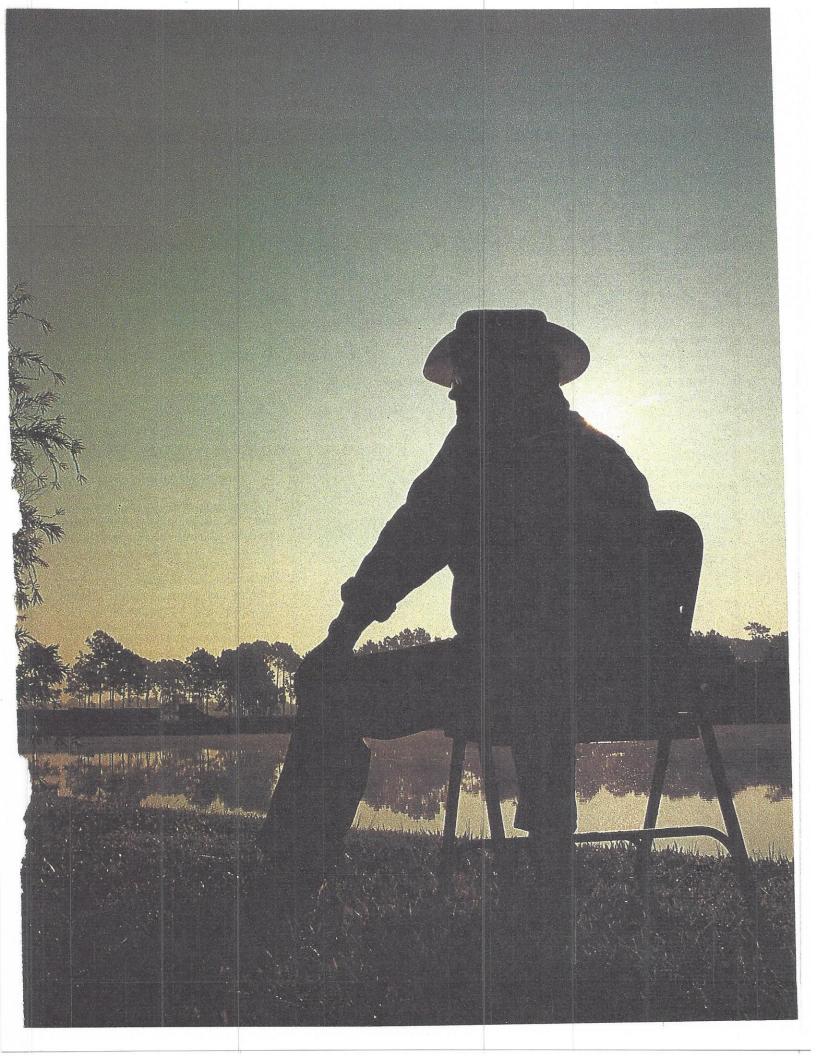
> By BRIAN PETERSON Photos by RON PINNER

Another South Florida dawn breaks over the hazy swamps around Lake Okeechobee. Inside the dining hall at his rehabilitation ranch, Mickey Evans sits alone, nursing a cup of coffee. The 57-year-old, leathery-faced cowboy is deep in thought.

Later that day Evans will release three more former drug addicts into the real world. The thought of letting them go sparks a familiar mix of emotions—a deep, satisfying joy from knowing that three lives have been restored; yet a heavy heart from the thought of having to say good-bye.

Evans fixes his gaze upon a display on the north wall of the empty dining hall. Below the banner which reads "Jewels From the Devil's Junkpile" are pictures of men, many smiling and proudly posing with a wife and children. These are men of all walks of life. Men like Tim McGinnis, a former alcoholic who once lived under a bridge in Orlando. After

After breakfast Evans retreats to Prayer Island before starting a long day's work.



going through Evans's program, he joined Youth With a Mission and led a group of missionaries to the kibbutz in Israel. This year McGinnis will marry a woman he met on the mission field.

And men like Hugh Murrow. He grew up in a home with alcoholic parents who both eventually died from alcoholism. Murrow used to live in the gutters of a North Carolina city. Now he leads his own "overcomers" ministry for alcoholics and addicts in Florida.

Evans finishes his coffee as the sun burns away the haze over the swamps and

the breakfast bell rings. Minutes later about 40 sober, cleanshaven young men emerge from barrack-type housing and file in for a hearty breakfast. Evans's day of ministry begins here and sometimes doesn't end until midnight.

The steadfast personality of Evans commands respect from the men in the program, but they're not afraid of him. They call him "Mickey" instead of "Mr. Evans." But they know he means business and they don't question his authority. He reminds them that it's a privilege to be at Dunklin Memorial Camp; out of the millions of alcoholics and the 6.5 million Americans dependent on drugs, God chose them to be in this program.

Dunklin Memorial Camp sits in the middle of a swampy area, 17 miles from the nearest city, Indiantown, which has population of 2,000. Only dirt roads lead to the camp. Sometimes called a "city of refuge," it only admits "dry" drunks or addicts who have been through initial detoxification and who desire to commit

"Jewels From the Devil's Junkpile" is a display of Dunklin Memorial Camp graduates-former alcoholics and drug addicts who have been set free from their bondage. Evans looks to the display to remind him of how God heals people.

themselves to the minimum six-month rehabilitation program.

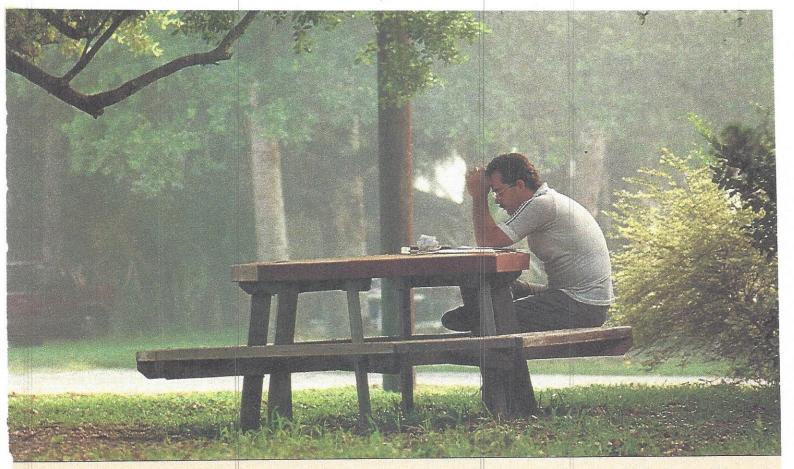
While it's not required that only Christian men enter the program, it's mandatory that the addict be open to change. spiritually and otherwise. Every activity, has a biblical basis and is Christ-centered. Nearly without exception, men emerge from the program as dedicated believers in Christ.

Evans knows the camp doesn't directly dent the national statistics. He could probably squeeze in another 20 men, but after running the camp for 25 years he's persuaded that the only way to make a lasting impact on an addict's life is to do it one-by-one, patiently working with him for a long time, then releasing him to a support group in a local community. Only in recent years has Evans seen the fulfillment of his vision to train leaders at the camp by showing them a successful program and then releasing them to minister to addicts in a church environment.

Take Jim Gaffney as an example. Giving up a comfortable life, Gaffney studied under Evans for 16 months and returned to teach his church-The Tabernacle Church in Melbourne, Florida (pastored by Jamie Buckingham)-to oversee weekly support groups and start a halfway house for men leaving the Dunklin Camp and other rehabilitation centers. Gaffney also works as a pharmacist one day a week.

"I had been sober for years before I entered Dunklin as a trainee, but it didn't take me long to realize that I was just as sick as some of those still struggling with addictions," recalls Gaffney. "My addiction just switched to being a workaholic. I thrived on the approval of others.

"In a sense, I used to be addicted to



In quiet solitude of the early morning, a man prays and takes a "daily moral inventory" to expose unhealthy attitudes. He asks himself questions such as, Am I acting phony or real? Am I self-righteous or humble? Am I complaining or grateful?

ministering in the wrong way, but Mickey taught me how to stop ministering in my own strength and start ministering in God's strength. I'm still learning, but now I can minister to others here in Melbourne while I learn."

At Dunklin, about 500 people from all areas of Florida belong to the church which meets in a 700-seat building on the property. Evans named it "The Church That Meets at Dunklin," emphasizing that the church is people, not a building. The congregation gathers Sunday morning in informal attire not just to listen to the pastor, Ron Ross, but to talk and pray with each other. For most who attend, this is the first church where they have been able to build lasting, meaningful friendships.

Ross also serves as Evans's right-hand man. He's the most eloquent and philosophical of the two. A former drug addict himself, Ross believes it's a tragedy to 'take a man out of a sick family and put him right back into it after rehabilitation.'

Ross requires that family members—either parents or spouse—be at the camp from Saturday noon until Sunday night for classes and other activities. Some families relocate to the area with the help of local churches, but others travel more

"Hard work never hurt anyone," says old Uncle Hugh, a 64-year-old former alcoholic on staff. He may be up in years, but Hugh outdoes almost all of the younger men in work output—from sunrise to sunset he travels around the camp with his truck, working on the landscape and in the nursery.

Such role models are what make the camp a success.



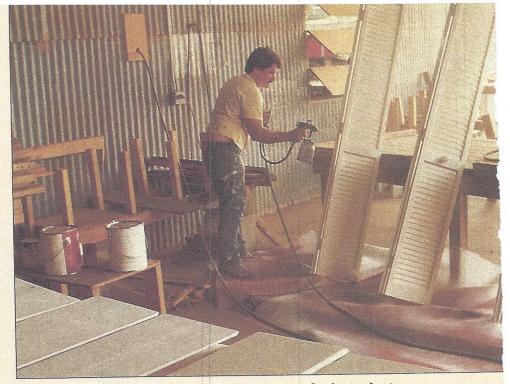
than a hundred miles each weekend.

Even after a person successfully completes the Dunklin program, accountability rarely ends there. A large number of graduates enroll in one of eight halfway houses around Florida or attend one of 45 "overcomer" support groups with which Dunklin is loosely affiliated. It is in these groups where recovering addicts can apply the last and most important principle to wholeness: to carry the message to other addicts and to practice the principles they have learned.

These overcomers welcome the chance to help others, after being on the receiving end for so long. They learn that the traditional church has failed to reach what Evans calls the "Fourth World" population—the 50 million to 70 million American social outcasts who are bound in chemical abuse, homosexuality, prostitution and the like.

It isn't easy to reach this Fourth World, even for those who can identify with the problems. Not unlike the traditional church, they fight the tendency to become ingrown.

Evans remembers, "At one of our recent overcomer meetings four live drunks burst in from off the street. Some of us started to gripe about how they were messing up our nice little meeting. We found out just how self-righteous we really were."



In the woodshop a worker applies a coat of paint to closet doors which will be installed in several new duplexes for married men in the program and their families.

Evans detected the same air of self-righteousness 25 years ago when he pastored the First Baptist Church in Indiantown. Then, at age 32, he grew restless. Evans was more at home on a cow pony than in the pulpit. Moreover, the young man had a growing conviction that the gospel he was preaching in

his comfortable church was not changing lives. Nor was he reaching and helping the people with the real problems.

"We had a nice little social club," Evans recalls. "It was the spring of 1963. We had built a new church building and a new parsonage. Our little flock was happy and content. But my own dad was dying of alcoholism. And the cowboys and ranchers, the young men and women on the rodeo circuit...' His voice breaks and tears come to his eyes as he thinks of them. "...they live a tough life. Alcohol was their only escape. And our church wasn't touching them. All we were doing was holding nice Sunday services for nice people—while the real world was going to hell all around us."

The discontent persisted. One afternoon Evans climbed in his pickup truck and headed down the dirt road that goes from Indiantown to the east bank of Lake Okeechobee. Driving through the desolate pastureland he stopped and looked out across the 320-acre track of alligator-infested swamp that belonged to an old moonshiner.

"I knew that was the place God wanted me to build a city of refuge for alcoholics," Evans recalls.

At first the owner of the land laughed when Evans told him about his dream. But Evans kept going back. He knew he had a mandate on his life. The owner finally agreed to sell—for \$200 an acre.

Evans's wife, Laura Mae, loved the new parsonage provided by the church in Indiantown. The idea of moving to the middle of a swamp and working with alcoholics had little appeal to her. When

Evans and a local cattle rancher ask a worker to "keep the flies away, but don't get bug spray in the feed." The animals are raised for consumption at the camp. When it comes to food, Dunklin is self-sufficient with its vegetable gardens, fruit trees, dairy cattle, bakery and butcher shop.



Evans took her out to see the land for the first time, a black snake wrapped around her leg. She screamed, "God may have spoken to you, but He hasn't said a word to me!"

But the same God who set a vision aflame in Mickey Evans soon spoke to his wife as well. Even so, it was difficult for her to leave a comfortable home and move into a swamp shack. To make matters worse, very few friends understood Evans's vision. "Our friends thought we were crazy," recalls Laura Mae. "They would say, "Why in the world would you leave a church of nice, respectable people to go out there with a bunch of drunks?"" But starting with a homemade camp trailer and four cottages he had moved on the property for \$400 each, Evans opened the camp. He named it after a Southern Baptist missionary named Dunklin who had a great influence on him in his childhood. (Evans later accepted Christ when he was 19.)

Throughout the years, Evans's vision has remained the same: to help addicts by using the principles that Christ taught so that they can help others. The success rate has doubled since the old days when Evans worked primarily with winos.

Recent studies indicate that a program is most successful when it lasts three months, when it involves the family and when ample after-care vided. Dunklin has all this, and adds at least three more aspects: intense spiritual self-evaluation, accountability and hard, productive work.

"We've got to raise their dignity, and part of that is having them work," says

Evans. "I designed the camp to be tough ...kind of like a Marine boot camp. We don't put up with foolishness out there."

The rules say it best: No telephone calls. No trips to town or weekends off. No coffee during work hours (Evans's philosophy: We want you to eat all you want at mealtime, but we work when we work). And when 6:15 a.m. comes, you wake up and get up—every day.

Breakfast is served at 6:30 sharp; if a man is late, everyone waits until he arrives. Mail is distributed, they eat heartily, then proceed to quiet time from 7:25 to 7:55. Each man finds a secluded place and evaluates his attitudes of the past 24 hours on a "daily moral inventory" form. From this he finds out whether he's been a man of self-pity, self-righteousness, denial, false guilt or 16 other negative attitudes. Then he prays about the problems and writes down his meditations. The daily two-hour Bible class starts promptly at 8:00. There he studies basic Christianity and scriptural principles for healing the chemically addicted.

At 10:15 it's time to work. And a tour through the camp proves that there's plenty of work to be done. First there's

the print shop where nearly all of the camp literature is printed. Ironically, the print shop building used to be the Indiantown bar. Evans bought the building for \$300.

Then comes the ranch, where cows and other animals are raised to feed the men; and the butcher shop, where the meat is prepared; and the bakery, where fresh donuts and bread are baked daily. On Sundays, local residents come from miles to buy the famous "Dunklin bread" for a two-dollar donation to the camp.

The machine shop and the wood construction building sit on the other side of the property. There workers repair pallets which are sold to the Indiantown flour mill and the nearby Clewiston sugar mill. This is one source of income.

Orange groves, palm tree groves and the greenhouse and nursery grace the perimeter of the camp. This is Uncle Hugh's territory—he's a former alcoholic who was saved at age 55 and went through the program nine years ago. Evans says the 64-year-old goes to bed at 7 p.m., gets up at 4 a.m., goes like a house afire all day, and gets more work done than three young men put together. He has a reputation of working the

Steps to Recovery

ickey Evans uses a 10-step program similar to Alcoholics Anonymous. But unlike AA, which speaks of a "higher power," Evans is unflinching as he teaches his men that the higher power is Jesus. At Dunklin Memorial Camp the staff basically uses Wesley's "Ten Steps to Revival From Conversion to Maturity":

1. I now see that I am unable to control my life by myself, but realize that the one who created me, the Lord Jesus Christ, can also make me whole.

2. I have made a conscious, intentional decision to turn my entire life over to the care and direction of Jesus Christ as Teacher, Healer, Saviour and Lord.

3. Having made this decision. I will obey God's call in Scripture to make a fearless, ethical, moral and scriptural inventory of my entire life in order to uncover all sins, mistakes, and character defects, and to make a written list of every item uncovered.

4. After completing this moral inventory I will "walk in the light as He is the light" by admitting to myself, to God and to at least one other person in Christ the exact nature of these wrongs.

5. Having agreed with God about my sinful behavior, I will ask His forgiveness through Christ and openly acknowledge that I am forgiven according to the Scripture.

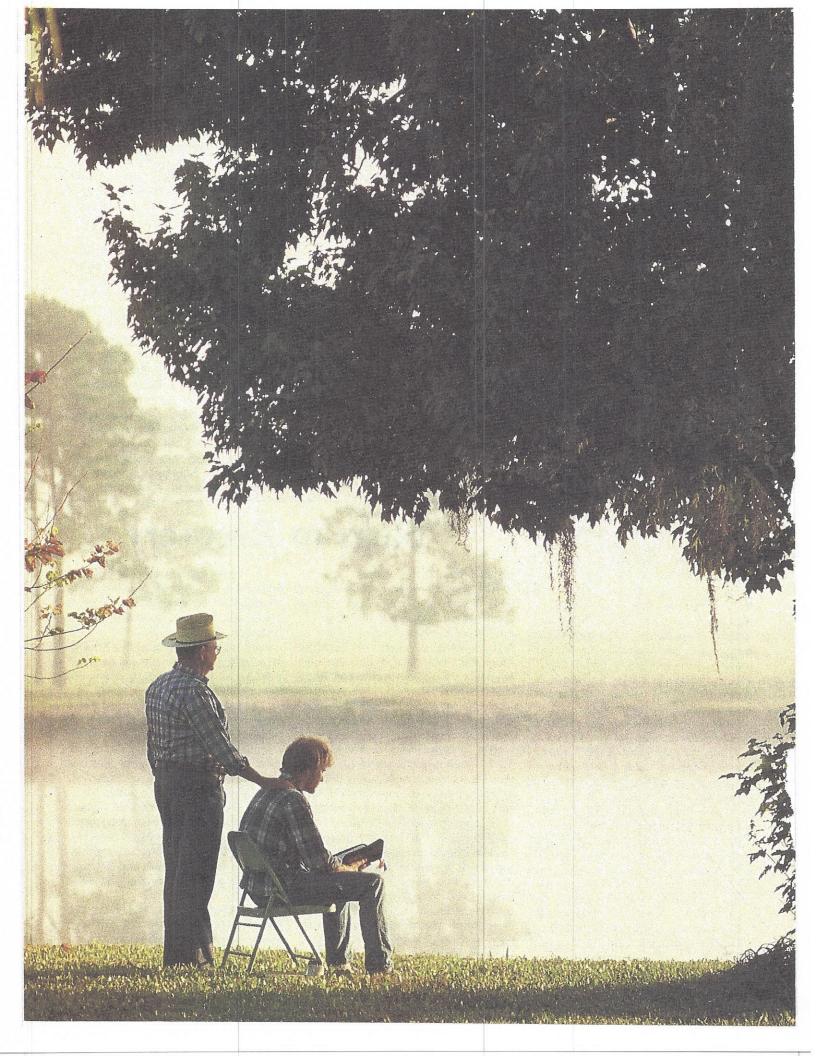
6. I will repent (turn away) from all these behaviors in thought and deed and ask God to remove each besetting sin through Jesus Christ.

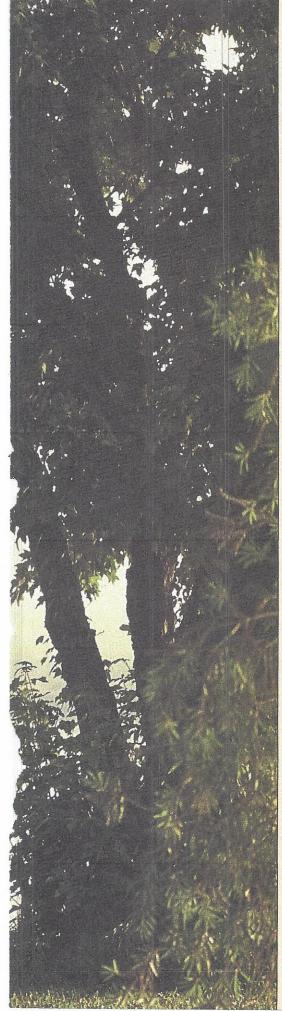
7. I will make a list of all the persons I have harmed in word or deed, and will purpose to confess my sins and short-comings to them. I will go directly to those persons and confess my sins and make restitution for all my behavior, unless to do so would cause further harm.

8. I will continue to consciously and prayerfully attempt to "walk in the light" by unceasingly taking personal inventory of all my temptations and sins, and by keeping a constantly open and clean relationship with God, myself and other persons.

9. I will make a list of all persons who I think have harmed me and will seek forgiveness and release from such harm.

10. I will continue in regular Scripture study, prayer, worship and fellowship to increase God's will in my life.





residents harder than any of the other supervisors.

Drug abuse and alcoholism causes a retardation of developmental skills, and good, hard work can bring them back. Ross explains, "Other programs also stress the importance of physical exercise, but they replace productive work with playing tennis and swimming. At Dunklin, you feel good when you see a job done."

Evans is more succinct: "The day you stop working the program is the day you leave."

Working up a sweat right along with everyone else, Evans performs tasks as varied as rounding up cattle on horseback, teaching others how to build a fence or hauling manure to fertilize the nursery. When he's not working, Evans canvasses the camp, asking each person he passes, "Has anybody told you yet today that he loves you?" Whatever the answer, he administers a bear hug as only he can and says he loves the person.

Tough love at Dunklin comes in the form of peer pressure. "If a man messes up, we'll confront him," says Evans with a stern look. But his countenance melts as he tells about the emotional, sometimes-grueling "sociogram" that each resident must participate in each week. The session is considered the heart of the program; a time of intimate encouragement and correction. All 40 of the recovering alcoholics and drug addicts are seated in a circle; no guests are allowed in this meeting. Each man selects and records which person in the program he feels was the best worker, the worst worker, most improved, least improved, most open, most closed. One by one, the men sit in the "hot seat" and listen to their peers' analysis of their behavior.

Evans explains, "The confronter always starts with 'I love you," and then he might say something like 'I decided you were the worst worker because I saw you wasting time at the orange groves." The confronter again says 'I love you' after his comments.

"Sometimes you'll see the floor wet with tears. There's nothing more beautiful when the body of Christ functions this way," Evans softly says. The biblical principle holds true: Confess your faults one to another that you may be healed.

Almost without exception, the root he is getting married.

cause of alcoholism and drug addiction can be traced to low self-esteem, often caused by faulty family relationships. A common root problem of men in the program is the lack of a positive male image.

As the sun sets on graduation Thursday, Evans attends an overcomers meeting in Indiantown. The three graduates he thought about that morning are there. At testimony time, each one says something about Evans—how he wasn't afraid to say he loved them, how he was the only *real* father they ever had, how he didn't give up on them. All the stories are unique, but a similarity threads them: Each man says that his problem was much deeper than just chemical addiction.

Communion follows. There the deeper problems are revealed: insensitivity to others' needs, selfishness, the bondage of religiosity. One by one, each person partakes of the bread and grape juice in the center of a human circle. Those in the rehab program and their wives approach the center, confessing their sins and thanking the Lord for their freedom.

Michael, a former musician in Nashville and drug addict, is one of the three graduating this weekend. Using the skills he learned in the honky-tonk bands, Michael sings his testimony: Jesus took me out of the Honky Tonks of Nashville/ Brought me to this Okeechobee swamp/ Put me on a crew with a man named Hugh/ And He taught me the whats and dos and don'ts/ He had me doin' things I didn't understand/ Like workin' with a shovel in my hand/ Cleanin' out septic tanks and hog pens too/ And I asked the Lord what it was He was trying to do/ And Uncle Hugh said, 'pulling attitudes.'

Through all this I met Jesus/ That's when I accepted Him in my life/ Through all this I met Jesus/ And now He walks with me, yes now He walks with me, now He walks with me side by side.

Evans listens and smiles, deep satisfaction wells up inside him. The time has come to say good-bye. With an embrace, he asks, "Has anybody told you yet today that he loves you?"

Editor's note: If you'd like to know more about leadership training at Dunklin Memorial Camp, write, 3342 SW Hosannah Lane, Okeechobee, FL 33474.

Brian Peterson is interim news editor of *Charisma & Christian Life*. This is his first cover story in the magazine. Later this month he is getting married.

A young man feels the steady hand of the first real father figure he ever had. The hardest test will come when he leaves; to remain sober in the real world he must have continued accountability. Evans is providing that in the overcomers groups throughout Florida.