

## News

# Troubled teens finding support among their peers at Vista Hill

By Erin Quackenbush

Cynde Roth and Mark Lees know that teen years often take a toll on kids. School, peer pressure and parental demands are a lot to handle. For some, it's too much. For those teen-agers, Roth and Lees are offering an intensive after-school counseling program in Solana Beach to help patients regain control of their lives.

Focusing on substance abuse and mental health, the Vista Hill facility is an eight-week outpatient program. It involves teens and

their families in group and private therapy to help identify and change potentially destructive behavior.

"It's to be able to offer something for the kids to stay in their home environment, their school environment, keep their life," said Roth.

Most of the 12- to 17-year-olds in the program are there for drug and alcohol abuse, kids like Joe Eickhoff, 17, who came to the program after a court ordered him to handle his substance abuse problem or go to Juvenile Hall.

Just past the program's halfway point, Eickhoff is already showing marked improvement, according to his father, Bob Eickhoff.

"So far, so good," he said. "It's a long road, though, especially for kids these days. There's so much out there, and there are hard choices."

Ninety-five percent of teen-agers are going to experiment with drugs or alcohol, and 70 percent of teens drink alcohol socially once or twice a week, according to Lees. From there, some will be led into addiction by either their environment or hereditary background.

Lees handles the substance abuse counseling, while Roth works with mental health patients. However, the teens often work together, because despite their different needs many of them have common triggers, such as anger, anxiety or depression.

For 17-year-old Lindsey, whose last name has been withheld for this article, depression may have been a cause and effect of a serious eating disorder. When she began to have suicidal thoughts, her parents enrolled her in Vista Hill to help her get better.

Her mom, Beverly, was immediately impressed with the way Roth handled her daughter, rejecting any excuses or refusals to talk. Roth taught Lindsey how to make better choices, and realize the consequences of her actions.

Often, teens in the program resist at first, whether they're skeptical about positive results or simply don't want to give up their drug. But throughout the

eight weeks, there's a visible difference in the kids, said Lees. Part of the reason they open up is because of veteran patients like Joe Eickhoff, who encourages newcomers to talk through their problems.

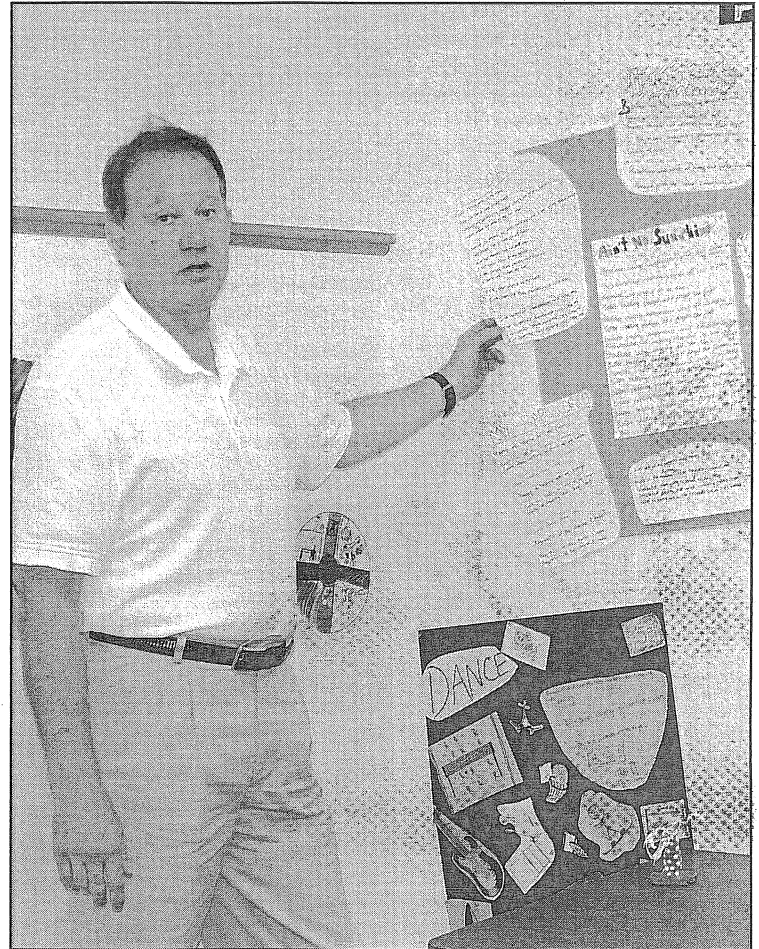
"I actually like explaining it to the other kids," said Eickhoff. "They take it more seriously because it's kind of like from one of their peers."

Group discussions are part of each of the three weekly sessions, and a family night is also scheduled once a week. Family nights are designed to not only work through teen substance or mental problems, but also address any contributing factors at home.

A common frustration for these kids is lack of family communication,

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Mark Lees shows off some recent student projects at Vista Hill.

said Lees, and parents are expected to alter their behavior as well.

"The more they change, the more their kids change, the less drugs their kids do," said Lees.

Vista Hill is unique in that it's the only mental health intensive outpatient programs in the county, but the program also incorporates certain techniques that set the facility apart. For example, Roth and Lees embark on a coach visit, where they visit a patient's home and get to know them in their element.

They also work a lot of art into the program to help teens better express their feelings, whether it's through painting, sculpture or cut-and-paste

projects. Oftentimes, kids can't verbalize what's going on in their head, but a simple picture of a cloud and lightning bolt helps portray anger or anxiety.

Joe Eickhoff said he's doing much better after time at Vista Hill. He still has a couple of weeks to go but has already distanced himself from his drug-using friends and is making plans for the future.

"I'm finished with that. I'm finished hanging out with those type of people," said Eickhoff. "I want to get a job and get my life back on track."

For more information about the program, call (858) 794-9735 or visit [www.vistahill.org](http://www.vistahill.org).