

Young men smoke after one of
the weekly rehab meetings.

A SOBER VILLAGE

*In Delray Beach, it takes balls to keep recovering
addicts on the righteous path.*

By MICHAEL KELLER
Photography By EDWARD LINSMIER



Ivan Baker tosses a fabric napkin over his shoulder and puts a bottle of chardonnay in a plastic chiller. Moving fluidly, he conveys the wine from the indoor bar to an outside table at Delray Beach's Dada Restaurant. He chats with the two seated ladies, telling a couple jokes while uncorking the bottle and filling their glasses. They laugh. He laughs. A light breeze blows.

Unbeknownst to the women, Baker has a secret that runs counter to this relaxing Friday evening happy hour. If that chardonnay touches his lips, his whole world will spontaneously explode. It's not hyperbole; it



Ivan Baker (standing, on left) speaks to housemates while Jarrett Slaff, at right, listens.

has happened before.

Baker is a recovering addict who started drinking when he was 12 years old. Clean for the last 10 months, he is trying to piece together his broken life.

His marketing company, wife and baby disappeared, along with \$250,000, in the course of an eight month-long drinking and crack binge.

"I lost it all," he says plaintively.

Baker is working hard to put things right. Along with his waiter job, he is a house manager in Saul Kane's addiction treatment and recovery halfway houses. He talks to new clients. He offers counsel learned from 10 months of living clean, an eternity to those new to sobriety. He figures out who stole the milk from the fridge in a community of young men.

"We see a lot of guys come and go. Lots of guys want to get sober, but can't," Baker says. "They haven't finished getting high yet. Everybody's story is unique, but we try to offer a common solution we've come to by walking through it ourselves."

"When they first get here, it's hard to sleep," Baker says. "There's a host of emotions. When you're 30 days sober, you're thinking about all the people you hurt. You hear your mom crying..."

Ivan Baker waits on a couple at Dada Restaurant in Delray Beach.





Saul Kane conducts a weekly meeting at one of the eight rehabilitation homes he operates in Delray Beach.

Recovering addicts don't sleep. It's a known thing. The first 30 days being clean throw the mind into tumult. So it's easy to spot a halfway house when you know what to look for – lights burning at all hours, people sitting around tables and on couches, others engulfed in billowing clouds of cigarette smoke. Everybody talks. When they don't have the bottle, all they have are their stories, and those get pushed around a table like cigarettes during a game of hearts.

"When they first get here, it's hard to sleep," Baker says. "There's a host of emotions. When you're 30 days sober, you're thinking about all the people you hurt. You hear your mom crying..."

"And you're thinking about all the stuff you want to do, but can't," another jumps in. Talking is part of rehab, a "manifestation of the disease," as one of the men said.

It is 1 a.m. on the corner of S.E. Seventh Street and Swinton, and the night is just getting started. Men, mostly young, mill about on the sidewalk, in a second-floor common area, and on the big porch of Kane's yellow house. This is one of his eight properties used to warehouse and begin the long road to rehabilitation for 40 men at a time. Two signs around the house announce "change," appropriate for the desires of the house's occupants, but in this instance proclaiming the now successful candidacy of a new American president.

"Look at all the junkies," says Jarrett Slaff, a New Jersey native who has been sober for nine months and is another house manager. "Look at them all hanging outside."

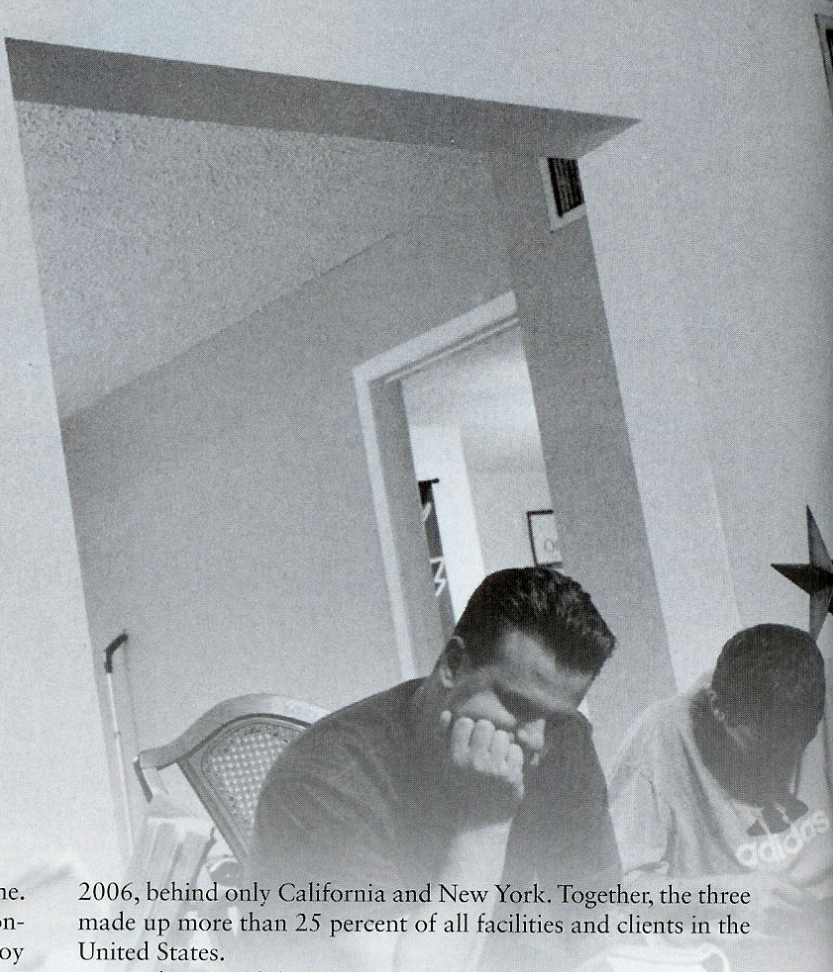
Jarrett is affectionate in his ribbing and mounts the steps to join the porch crowd. He's been in this show for a long

time, first being confined to treatment at the age of 13. At 16, he served nine months in prison on weapons and heroin possession charges. He was shot in the leg copping drugs at 19 and the slug still sits behind his left knee. He's been in and out of treatment programs 12 times. He is 23 years old.

Saul is the patriarch of this tense family. He knows what the men in his halfway houses are feeling; he is one of them. Clean for four years now, the 35-year-old has walked their long, lonely road. He was addicted to heroin, OxyContin, coke, and "really anything I could get my hands on." Three years ago he replaced his addiction with another in the form of saving young men from themselves, doing it with the same sense of mission as one in search of the next high.

Business doesn't pick up for Saul until night falls. That's when the men get off work and have time to think about the urges that brought them to his doorstep in the first place. It is often night when he's got to go into one of Delray Beach's crack dens to pull out a charge who has fallen off the path. He works mostly with recovering men, not women, as he doesn't "like dealing with women in recovery. A woman 19 days sober can do a lot of things. So many bad things happen between women and halfway house owners. It's just disgusting."

A cell phone comes alive at sunset and becomes the instrument of his sober ministry. With it, he tends his flock of addicts and the people who love them like a spider tends the strands of its web. He fixes them to him with the phone. He



tends. He prunes. He's got 934 contact numbers on that phone. And he's got a game called Bubble Burst, which he plays constantly. He plays it while talking to a distraught mother, her boy in danger of falling back into the abyss. He plays it when talking a guy back from the brink of relapse or suicide.

"I just think for him to go home right now is not even an option," he tells a mother on the phone, and scores a bubble bonus. "It's not about the money. If you want to send him to more of a lock-down place in north Florida, I totally understand that."

She fights back sobs as they hang up, coming to no conclusion on the case, which is often the way it is. It seems weird to be playing a video game when someone's life is falling apart, doesn't it, Saul?

"I play Bubble Burst so I don't have to think about talking to this mother and telling her that her kid was kicked out of my halfway house 20 minutes after he got there because he needed to go get high."

According to The Open Society Institute, drug addiction is one of the most common diseases in the United States, with more than 9 million Americans needing treatment. The organization says addiction abounds at the same rate as cancer and more than 9,000 drug-induced deaths happen each year. Add to that the fact that 25 percent of America's AIDS cases result from injection drug use, and the scope of the problem each of these men face daily comes into focus.

Florida alone held 5 percent of the country's facilities and 5 percent of all clients in

2006, behind only California and New York. Together, the three made up more than 25 percent of all facilities and clients in the United States.

Delray Beach has become one of the places known around the country as a destination for those trying to get sober. The area is home to more than 5,000 halfway house beds, with 1,500 jammed along the Atlantic Avenue corridor, Saul says.

It's high stress keeping 40 men from falling back into the darkness every night, and Saul is always on guard. The phone rings. He talks quickly and without inflection.

"Dude, you smoked crack. Then you went and stuck needles in your arm," Saul says. "You need to slow down and take a fucking look at your life. I love you to death, man, but you have got to follow halfway house rules."

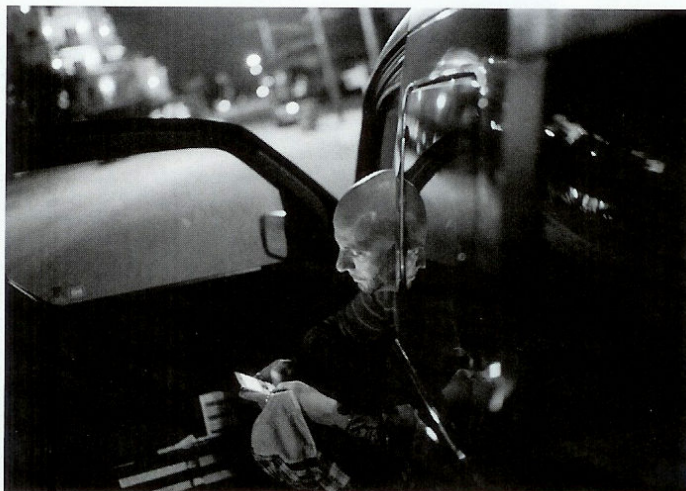
"Yeah, so what do you want my rules to be?" asks the voice.

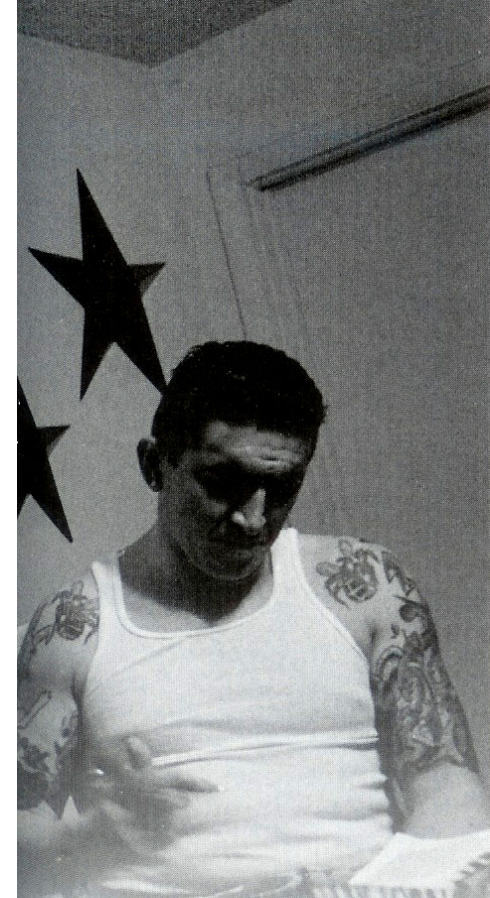
"Same as everyone else, man. You came down here not because your parents caught you smoking pot in the basement. You have a serious fucking problem, do you not?"

"Yeah," the voice now sheepish.

"But in our house, we're trying to be sober. You have to get your head out of your ass, and you need to do it quickly." This last statement Saul says with urgency. "Dennis, you know I have to cut you out if you're not doing the right thing. You know I love you..."

Pausing from his nightly duties for a moment, Saul Kane plays a game on his cell phone before returning to work.





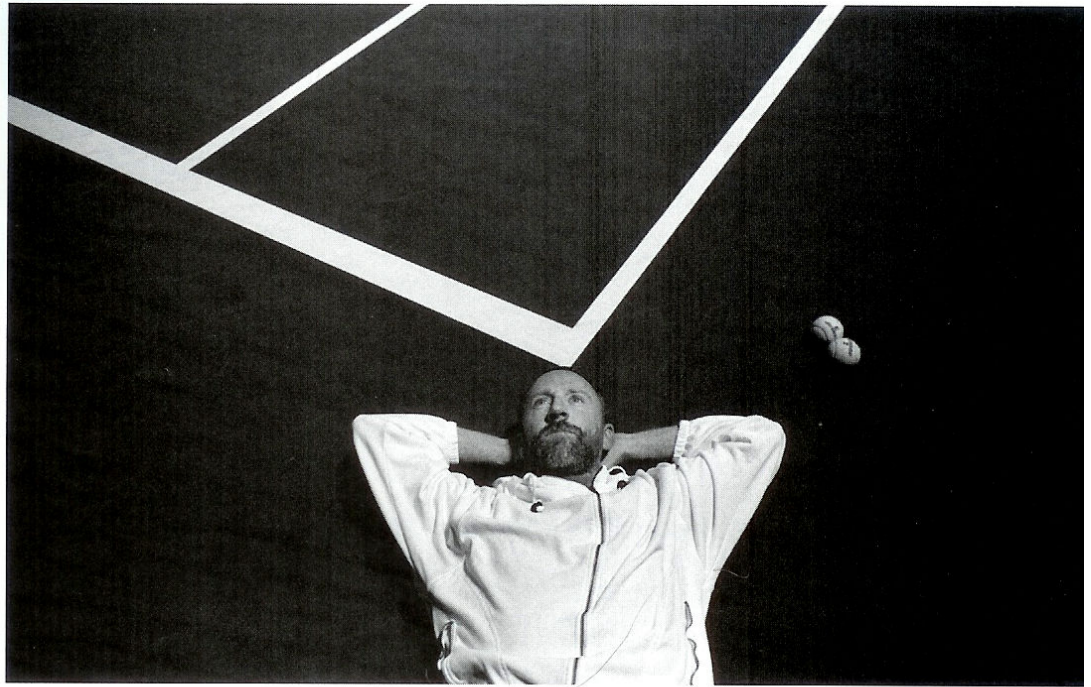
“But I need to take a positive journey with Dennis.”

Saul laughs. “You need to take a couple fucking positive journeys with Dennis. I’ve got \$13,000 in bills every month, but I’m not kicking you out if you’re trying to do the right thing. I’m not doing this for the Rolls Royce. Just pull your head out of your ass.”

This is Saul’s tough love strategy, which he says, along with “God and Alcoholics Anonymous,” keeps 70 percent of his wards sober during their stay with him. The tough act fits his look. With a baseball cap pulled down low over his bald head almost obscuring the eyes, a short-cropped beard, and sleeves of multi-colored tattoos covering both arms, he looks like the recovering addict he is. He says his condition is not something to get through, as he will always be an addict. He has just trained himself to fight the urge, something he tries to teach others.

“I was fired for crashing vans with foster kids in them into walls because I was high,” he says. “I no longer want to drink like normal people. I’m happy; my life is full. I do not want to lose my connection with God by getting drunk. The alcoholic has no mental defense against the first drink.”

He demands the men in his program develop a life outside of needles, pills and booze. He helps them get jobs and organizes group volunteer outings like beach clean-ups.



Portrait of John Butler, Delray Beach International Tennis Championship tournament director.

The Delray Beach International Tennis Championships, held this year from Feb. 21 to March 1, is a highlight on the recovery group’s calendar. For the last few years, tournament director John Butler has been hiring 10 of Saul’s men to work the event from setup to tear down.

“The quality of work these guys put in is second to none,” Butler says. “It’s a healthy environment, and they’re around positive people like our volunteers. He’s very protective of having the right guys here and not bringing them in before they’re ready to be involved.”

This year, Justin Reilly, a 23-year-old who cleared 120 days sober at the end of 2008, will be in charge of Saul’s tournament work gang if he stays clean. The owner of a house-building subcontractor business in Connecticut is hoping to make a new life for himself in South Florida. He, too, is heavily tattooed and pierced. Letters on each of

the fingers of his right hand spell out the word “hope.”

“It seems like working the tournament will be more a mental headache than a physical challenge,” he says. “But, oh yeah, I’m looking forward to it. I shot heroin, smoked crack, everything. I was a shitty mess. I like the change here, the support.”

It is safe to say that most of the 50,000 attendees will not even know Reilly’s crew is there working. They will be wiping down tables, taking the trash from the food court and restocking supplies, running back and forth between food vendors and athlete prep areas. They’ll be running at full steam 12 to 14 hours a day, going home only to sleep, and, if previous years are any indication, loving every minute of it.

“John’s given these guys jobs and given them things to do for a couple weeks,” Saul says. “It makes them feel better about themselves. They can look at it in the end and see that they put together this shiny tennis show. It’s a pretty big deal for these guys, and it’s a pretty big deal that John and the tournament put their trust in 10 recovering drug addicts.”

The tournament program can generate a positive feedback loop. A former member of Saul’s program who had graduated to a stable job recently contacted Butler. He offered his company as a sponsor of the event. The proposal came with one condition – that the do-

“John’s given these guys jobs and given them things to do for a couple weeks,” Saul says. “It makes them feel better about themselves.”

pathology

nation be earmarked specifically to pay for more recovering addicts to work the tournament.

But with every step forward, the specter of a destructive fall backwards reappears. Butler hopes the hard work isn't counter-productive in the recovering addicts' fragile lives.

"I'd like to hope they go on after and get better and continue to have this workload daily to focus on something beyond their addiction, but unfortunately not all of them do," Butler says. "After the tournament, their life comes to a screeching halt. Imagine how long that day feels to them."

For the sober addict, anything can be that which sends them off into the darkness. For those most at risk, Saul will hold their paychecks in an effort to avoid the binge that can come after a hard day's work. Otherwise, Butler lets Saul know when they are getting money so Saul can be weary of any unexpected absences from the house.

Still, everybody hopes the world-class pro tournament's blue courts will be the first steps down a new path. Their footfalls will blaze a new way; by its nature, every recovery is singular. But everyone also knows this might just be another stop on the long road that ends in either the morgue or prison. And the road to relapse is beaten by a million of the defeated souls who came before. Broken hearts and shattered psyches litter the way. People fall back into heavy drug use 50 percent of the time and 90 percent have at least a brief relapse, according to the addiction treatment non-profit Caron Foundation.

Even in a program like Saul's, things can easily fall apart. One of the successful former residents who stood out at last year's tournament had fallen back from his first tentative steps into sobriety.

He calls Saul from the beach a few months before this year's tournament where he sits alone. He is reaching out for help.

"Are you high right now?" Saul asks.

"No, man, Not now." His raspy voice is hollow with despair.

"When was the last time you got high?"

"Last night. I started two days ago and I haven't stopped."

"What did you take?"

"I snorted coke. And Roxy." Roxy is the street name for roxicodone, a narcotic pain reliever.

"Did you take the Roxy in a pill?"

"No, I shot it."

"Oh, man. I'll get over to you. Are you gonna get high in, like, the next hour?"

"No. Not in the next hour."

It's not an unusual call for Saul to field. He moves into action, calling on his house managers to swing the safety net around the caller.

But even with the odds stacked against them, buried deep in the hearts of all the denizens of Saul's yellow halfway house is the spark of hope to once again live a normal life, where the urge has been wrestled into submission. And, hopefully for them, the village will be there to help.

"We've had guys working the tournament who were extremely successful and continue to be successful," Butler says. "They used it as a catalyst to move forward and continue to rock on. Some have run into problems. It's interesting that they were in charge of this multimillion-dollar spectacle and then they just fell apart. It's painful to watch." ■



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