

# Drug addicts kick their habits through mentor program.

**10th anniversary**  
| The Central City  
Concern program has a  
65% success rate

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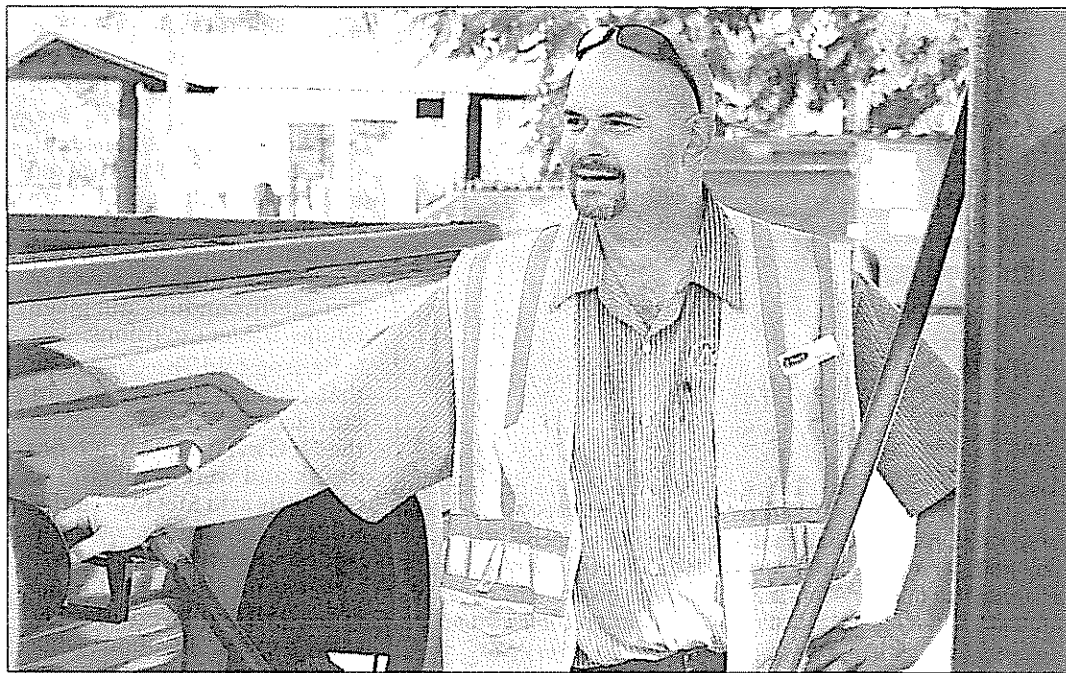
Doug Bishop was only 9 when he started drinking and smoking weed, a fourth-grader starting a three-decade spiral of addiction.

By 11, when most kids are making the transition to middle school, Bishop had graduated to crystal meth and cocaine and notched his first burglary arrest in support of a growing habit. By 14, he was living on the streets, revolving through the juvenile justice system and doing "whatever I could do to stay high."

"My drug use was every day, all day," he said.

Now 40 and sober for three years, Bishop said he never worked a day before age 39. He never had a bank account, a driver's license, a Social Security number or a permanent address, despite a habit that required thousands of dollars a month during increasingly short stints of freedom.

Bishop may have been an early bloomer, but his drug use and criminal history aren't unusual. What is more surprising is not only that he's alive, but also that his life has taken a 180-degree turn — a testament, he said, to Central City Concern's Mentor Recovery Program.



BRENT WOJAHN/THE OREGONIAN

**Doug Bishop, clean after years of addiction, works at an Astro gas station in North Portland. Bishop credits Central City Concern's Mentor Recovery Program with helping him put his life together.**

"This program isn't just treatment," he said. "It's a safe place to live. It's support. It's mentors who have been through what I have, not just learned it out of a book. ..."

## 400 at celebration

More than 400 people, most of them alumni, showed up at the Melody Ballroom in Southeast Portland over the weekend to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the program that many credit with saving their lives.

This was a crowd with mileage

on it, one full of hard stares, tattooed bodies and hair-raising experience. But it was also one of vocal thanksgiving. Spontaneous hugs, shout-outs and warm handshakes were the rule.

"I probably know 40 percent of the people in this room," said Dionne Preston, a 45-year-old Portlander sober for four years.

Preston hopes to receive her bachelor's degree from Portland State University in June. She's maintaining a 3.76 GPA as a double major in social work and criminal justice, fields in which

she already has a long résumé.

Preston smoked crack cocaine while a 16-year-old student at Jefferson High School. By age 23, as the drug spread through North and Northeast Portland, it dragged Preston along with it — into prostitution, the loss of her three children and hopelessness.

"It wasn't that I didn't care about my kids," she said. "My caring had absolutely nothing to do with it. I just didn't know any other way to live."

"This program literally saved

my life."

Started in 1999 with a \$150,000 grant from Multnomah County to combat an epidemic of heroin deaths in Portland, the Mentor Recovery Program has now served some 1,700 addicts and claims an unheard of success rate of 65 percent.

Mentors in the program, recovering addicts themselves, say that's because of its long-term orientation. While mentoring has become a common component of treatment programs, it was almost unheard of a decade ago, especially for heroin addicts.

Stitched to Central City Concern's other programs, it can provide a structured continuum that includes treatment, one-on-one support, drug-free housing, employment assistance and, most importantly for many, the opportunity to give back to the community.

"When you're working with people who are really damaged, who don't have any of the life skills, you can't just put them through treatment and send them back into the community," said Jill Kahnert, supervisor of the mentor program. "It's a huge transition. The last thing we want to do is set people up for failure."

## Cuts down crimes

The program's payoff is not just rebuilt lives, said Ed Blackburn, executive director of Central City Concern, but also lower drug traffic and crime in

Portland. A study by PSU's Regional Center for Social Research followed 87 graduates of the program. Annual crime losses in Portland from the group — estimated at \$2 million before treatment — declined by 93 percent after graduation.

Multnomah County Chairman Ted Wheeler, the man holding the program's \$300,000 purse strings, was at Saturday's celebration. He told the crowd that his own family has struggled with addiction, and that it's the No. 1 health issue facing the community.

"The cost of addiction in Oregon is \$5 billion a year," he said. "That's staggering. That's why it's so important for programs like the Mentor Recovery Program to fill the void."

Bishop lived in that void until 2006, when he latched onto the mentor program during his last stint in prison. He'd hit bottom, he said. He finally wanted to quit but didn't know how.

As of Oct. 19, he'll be celebrating three years clean. He's been at his current job 16 months and said he's never been late, never called in sick. He's married. He owns a car. And he just got back from a paid vacation, driving to Yellowstone National Park.

"Life is good," he said. "I'll always participate in this program."

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