

Loving those on the margins

Respecting other's free will

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROXANA ROSARIO

Pam Dawkins



Photo: Elizabeth Parker

Addicts, and their addictions, come in all shapes and sizes. A common denominator for many, said Roxana Rosario, is that a family history of addiction, domestic violence or other trauma tilted the scales from the start.

Roxana is a licensed clinical social worker and a program director with the Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, in the Southeastern Mental Health Authority. She spent the first part of her career with the Connecticut Department of Children and Families working for Child Protective Services in the trauma field.

The addict is no different from anyone else; the disease cuts across race, age, gender, and economic class.

She attends the Church of the Good Shepherd in Hartford now but traces the beginnings of her Episcopal faith to St. Ann's Episcopal Church in the south Bronx. Roxana was six or seven when she moved from Puerto Rico to The Bronx, and four years older when she began attending St. Ann's. She moved to Connecticut soon after and attended a number of Hartford churches — St. Monica's, St. James, Christ Church Cathedral — before finding Good Shepherd.

Her belief in God and that she has a purpose helps her to work with her patients. "This is a calling ... to want to be with human beings at their lowest of low ..."

She sees that some very educated people — she has a bachelor's from the University of Hartford, an MSW from UCONN and is a Ph.D. candidate at The Institute for Clinical Social Work — can sometimes fail to see the humanity in addicts.

Roxana's faith allows her to bring hope and acceptance to the table. "I accept people for where they're at and who they are."

Her religious upbringing did not give her the tools to work with addicts, but a connection to God and to others helps with their recovery, whether it's with organized religion or a twelve-step program.

Roxana credits her own participation in a twelve-step program for families affected by alcoholism with strengthening her relationship with God. Not surprising, she said, considering that many of the 12 steps came from the Bible — taking inventory, making amends, being witnesses to one another. And recovery meetings are organized like a Mass, with a reading from a book and sharing testimony.

"It brings you right back to God... the unconscious collective, the consciousness of the group. Miracles happen. It's fascinating."

The Episcopal Church even has a more direct connection to twelve-step programs.

Dr. Samuel Moor Shoemaker, rector at Calvary Church in New York from the 1920s to the 1950s, was a member of the Oxford Group, a Christian fellowship organization founded in the 1920s. The Oxford Group helped Bill Wilson (Bill W.) get sober and connected him with Dr. Bob Smith (Dr. Bob S.); the two later founded Alcoholics Anonymous, adopting variants of some of the Oxford Group's practices.

According to a biography of Dr. Shoemaker on AA's website:

"Bill W. made it clear that Sam Shoemaker 'passed on the spiritual keys by which we were liberated'. The first three Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, the starting point for sobriety in the A.A. program, were inspired in part by Shoemaker. Bill further explained that "the early A.A. got its ideas of self-examination, acknowledgement of character defects, restitution for harm done, and working with others straight from the Oxford Groups and directly from Sam Shoemaker, their former leader in America, and from nowhere else."

"Dr. Shoemaker helped A.A. in fundamental ways. Physically, he provided refuge for alcoholics in New York though Calvary Church. Of greater importance was his spiritual aid, which directly influenced the Twelve Steps and the nature of A.A.'s program of recovery. His long and close friendship with Bill W. provided support to the co-founder, and helped the Fellowship weather its fledgling years."

Nearly 85 years have passed since A.A. got its start, and dozens of similar programs now exist. Addiction, which often goes hand-in-hand with mental illness, is treated as a disease instead of a character flaw and, as Roxana has learned, the addict is no different from anyone else; the disease cuts across race, age, gender, and economic class.

There are more downs than ups in the work, Roxana said, and nothing happens quickly. But, "I love my job, I love what I do," even though it is frustrating to be powerless.

"I still do not have power over their free will," she said. "We have to respect the free will of another human being."

She has learned a lot from her clients, including resiliency, growth and survival. "When they heal, I heal."

What do we know about the opioid crisis?

Roughly **21 to 29 %** of patients prescribed opioids for chronic pain misuse them

Between **8 & 12 %** develop an opioid use disorder

An estimated **4 to 6 %** who misuse prescription opioids transition to heroin

About **80 %** of people who use heroin first misused prescription opioids

Opioid overdoses increased **30 %** from July 2016 through September 2017 in 52 areas in 45 states

The Midwestern region saw opioid overdoses increase **70 %** from July 2016 through September 2017

Opioid overdoses in large cities increase by **54 %** in 16 states

Source: National Institute on Drug Abuse; National Institutes of Health; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Resources & Services

In Connecticut

- Department of Mental Health & Addiction Services (DMHAS) offer a full range of services and resources — ct.gov/dhmas
- Connecticut affiliate of NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) *see description below* — namict.org (check website for local resources and groups)

Nationally

- The HEAL (Helping to End Addiction Long-term) SM Initiative of the National Institutes of Health, offers hope for people, families, and communities affected by this crisis — heal.nih.gov/
- Mental Health First Aid (courses to teach people "how to identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental health illnesses and substance use disorders") — mentalhealthfirstaid.org
- NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) offers educational programs, advocacy, a help line, and public awareness events and activities — nami.org



Pam Dawkins is a Middletown, CT based freelance writer. She is the former business section editor of The Middletown Press and the Connecticut Post.