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# Chaplain pushing to change lives

## Boulder County Jail worker honored for his book

By Vanessa Miller (Contact)  
Photos by Mark Leffingwell

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**With an award-winning self-help book to his name and an addiction-recovery foundation under his direction, Boulder County's jail chaplain is back from a one-year sabbatical and taking ground-breaking counseling steps to help inmates turn their lives around.**

In an age of advancing technology and shifting addictions, Joe Herzanek has started counseling former inmates and their families via e-mail. He's also launched a Web site and foundation packed with self-help resources, and he's penned an award-winning book that dares to answer the question, "Why Don't They Just Quit?"

In 2007, Herzanek left the daily chaplain grind of helping inmates work through issues — both on a spiritual and physical level — to become an author, foundation principal and innovator.

During his time off, Herzanek said he gained renewed perspective and insight for helping people battle addiction, and in his 15th year at the jail, Herzanek has instituted its first 12-step narcotics-addiction class.

Male and female inmates in Boulder County can attend one of five Narcotics Anonymous classes.

"We get about 35 people in each of the five classes," he said. "Getting 15 to 20 people is a big number for the jail."

The facility offers addiction counseling at the individual and group level, but before the Narcotics Anonymous program, Herzanek said much of the emphasis was on alcohol.

"About 90 percent of the inmates have substance-abuse problems," he said. "And the majority are equally or more into drugs than just alcohol."

### 'I'm here to change my life'

As sunlight slipped into the jail through a thin window Tuesday, casting light on the concrete floor in stripes like bars, a circle of navy-clad men read aloud copied pages from the Narcotics Anonymous book.

"Our resistance to change seems built in, and only a nuclear blast of some kind will bring about any alteration," one inmate read Tuesday's group discussion at the jail centered around sobriety slip-ups that often play a role in sending inmates back to jail — and how they don't have to be all bad.

"A relapse, if we survive it, may provide the charge for the demolition process," the inmate continued reading. As in most help groups, Boulder County inmates rounding out the circle were given a chance to share their relapse experiences — starting with the chaplain. "From age 13 to 29, I used," Herzanek said.



Chaplain Joe Herzanek talks about his trouble with drug and alcohol abuse while he leads an inmate meeting.

Once he decided to quit drinking and went a time without a sip, Herzanek said, he forgot the power of his addiction. He told the inmates he allowed himself to go to a bar and order “just” one beer.

“Five to six beers later, I realized, ‘This is wrong,’” he said. “People forget that it’s the first drug that starts the whole thing over.”

That resonated with Jason Wahlstrom, 22, who was scheduled to be the first person to graduate from the county’s drug court. Instead, shortly before he was due to finish, Wahlstrom said he used once, and again, and then let himself go.

“I would sneak around like I was being a ninja or something,” said Wahlstrom, who’s been charged with more than 10 crimes in Boulder County, including many drug violations.

“This is a wake-up call,” he said. “I’m here to change my life.” Joshua Solis, 39, said he’s learned through distanced loved ones that he can’t handle just a few drinks or hits. “One is too many, and 1,000 is never enough,” Solis said.

Although Marc Falkenhan, 26, said he’s been addicted to methamphetamines since age 13, he told his peers that he experienced true sobriety for the first time in April. He said he lost hold of that abstinence one afternoon in Loveland and landed back in jail.

“But I got my first taste of sobriety, and I liked it,” Falkenhan said. “I used to say, ‘I can get high when I’m out,’ but now I know there’s life out there.”

### **‘Don’t bail them out’**

Chaplain Herzanek said that over the years he’s been challenged to find new and innovative tools to help aid recovery, and the Internet has become a valuable resource.

He and his wife recently started the Changing Lives Foundation, which aims to provide resources for substance abuse, drug addiction, alcoholism and other compulsive behaviors at [www.changinglivesfoundation.org](http://www.changinglivesfoundation.org). Visitors to the site also can find specific information for at least 15 different drugs and addictive behaviors.

People in need of support or advice can e-mail Herzanek from the home page. Herzanek said he’s been communicating electronically with more and more former inmates and family members.

“I do e-mail counseling every day,” he said last week. “Today I was e-mailing with a mother whose son was strung out on cocaine. She wanted some encouragement.”

Herzanek said he often advises family members to stop helping. “Don’t bail them out, literally,” he said. “Start allowing the consequences of their poor choices to do the work.” That’s the message at the center of Herzanek’s recently published book that this spring won “best self-help book” in the Next Generation Indie Book Awards.

Herzanek since has been interviewed by national publications and asked to share his perspective at other facilities. He talks mostly about the notion that family members can help loved ones who are waiting to “hit bottom” by “raising the bottom” and starting the healing sooner.

Lee Barchan, executive director of the Transitions Recovery Program in Miami Beach, Fla., has said Herzanek’s book is unique in its focus on the families of addicts. He said there are plenty of books to help the recovering person, but “very few speak to those on the ‘outside,’ who want to help, but don’t know where to begin.”



Inmates finish an addiction-recovery meeting with a prayer Wednesday at the Boulder County Jail.

Visit the Web site of Boulder County Jail chaplain Joe Herzanek’s Changing Lives Foundation at: [www.changinglivesfoundation.org](http://www.changinglivesfoundation.org)

Order copies of his book, “Why Don’t They Just Quit?” at the foundation’s Web site or at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)