

BOUND FOR GLORY



How Northbound Treatment Services Founder Paul Alexander started a new path in young adult addiction treatment with the Collegebound Program.

By **KELSEY ALLEN**

As a certified addiction treatment specialist, Paul Alexander understands why it's important for people in early recovery to avoid major life changes. It's hard enough to stay sober. Why add to the stress by starting a new romance, changing careers or moving residences?

As a person in recovery, Alexander also understands why that doesn't work for everyone. It didn't for him. After two false starts, Alexander only got — and stayed — sober because he made a major life change. With just 30 days

sober, the 23-year-old enrolled in a drug and alcohol studies class at Saddleback College in Mission Viejo, California.

Three times a week, Alexander would leave the safe and secure bubble where he was in treatment, drive 30 miles to the community college and walk into an environment full of threats to sobriety (peer pressure, easy access to drugs and alcohol, stress, anxiety, academic pressures). After class, he returned to the treatment center, where he refocused on his recovery, learned his triggers and how to stay alert to signs of relapse, and developed healthy strategies for coping with stress.





It is often suggested that people new to recovery put off going to college until they feel strong enough to face such a challenge. But for Alexander, it was the opportunity to further his education and truly turn his life around while within the supportive and highly accountable treatment environment that made him feel strong enough to face the challenge of sobriety.

"I didn't just want to get a 'get-well job' and go to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings," Alexander says. "That's not recovery. I wanted to be challenged. I wanted to do something with my life."

And he did. In 2008, Alexander founded Northbound Treatment Services in Newport Beach, California, where young adults can participate in Collegebound, a program that supports students as they work toward a GED; enroll in and attend local colleges, universities and trade schools; and engage in all aspects of treatment, including meeting with their therapist, attending groups, participating in addiction education and working the 12 steps.

"When we first started doing this, people thought we were nuts," Alexander says. "'You can't send a student to school early in recovery! They'll relapse!' We found the exact opposite. We saw that it really complemented their recovery. It built their self-esteem. It gave them goals and purpose and meaning in their life. It gave them a reason to stay sober."

*Paul Alexander, founder and owner
Northbound Treatment Services*

TEACHING RECOVERY

While still a client at a treatment center — and a student at Saddleback College — Alexander had an idea to take his experience pursuing his educational goals early in sobriety and turn it into a program within a residential treatment center that assists individuals in reintegrating back into the college environment.

Based on his firsthand experiences and backed by research, Alexander believed individuals participating in a treatment program who continued their education, especially if it included drug and alcohol addiction counselor training, would be more likely to experience post-release success.

When Alexander left the treatment center to attend classes at the community college, he felt empowered. With every completed homework assignment, he gained back the self-efficacy and self-esteem that was lost during his active addiction. With every completed course, he rediscovered his

Mike Neatherton, president and CEO of Northbound Treatment Services with Heather Fotion, program manager of Collegebound and Careerbound

passions and unearthed a sense of purpose. Taking on the role of a counselor-in-training gave him the incentive to stay sober and active in his recovery.

"When someone studies the physical, psychological and social effects of drugs and alcohol and learns more about the disease that they're afflicted with, it's a powerful dynamic," Alexander says. "It's an eye-opener. You start thinking, 'Wow, this could be a profession for me? I've come from the depths and despair of addiction to the place where I can get paid to help others? I want to do that in my spare time for fun and for free, but now you're telling me I can get paid for it?'"

After completing treatment, and logging a year of sobriety, Alexander and two colleagues assisted in the development of a voluntary program that placed residential treatment center clients in addiction counselor training classes at Saddleback College.

His hypothesis was right. Clients who participated in the program were more likely to receive positive estimations of successful recovery from their clinicians at the time of their release and, more importantly, were significantly more likely to have maintained continuous sobriety six months after discharge than clients who didn't participate in the program.

Alexander ran the program for five years before he left to become a full-time student. He earned a bachelor of arts in criminology, law and society from the University of California, Irvine (UC Irvine), and a doctor of law from Loyola Law School, Los Angeles. Armed with an education, Alexander founded Northbound and started a new path in young adult addiction treatment with the Collegebound Program.

EXPERIENCING LIFE

Michael Boyer needed a new path. He was halfway through his senior year at the University of Denver when he figured he'd had enough. After spending the past seven years in active addiction, he felt spiritually bankrupt.



Boyer completed a 30-day primary treatment program and started looking for ways to complete his degree without returning to the environment he associated most with using. His counselor told him about Northbound.

"They told me about this place in Southern California with a great recovery community and a college program," Boyer recalls. "The college program was the most important. The fact that it was on the beach wasn't that bad, either."

Within a month of arriving at Northbound, Boyer was going to school three days a week at UC Irvine and engaging in study groups five days a week with other Collegebound participants at Northbound. He was also practicing meditation, participating in process groups with a therapist, going to meetings and deepening his recovery program. He wasn't a college student with treatment support; he was a client with college support.

"I was starting my life, starting to be an adult, learning how to take on that responsibility in a very safe and structured environment," Boyer says.

That is what underlies everything at Northbound, from the residential and outpatient programs to the Collegebound and Careerbound programs. Dubbed In Vivo (or in life), the innovative treatment model empowers clients to experience the joys, challenges, stresses and success of real life while within the supportive treatment environment. In the Collegebound Program, that means immersing clients in the college setting, exposing them to triggers, reintroducing them to the classroom



setting and to other students — and then bringing them back to the treatment center to process the issues that arise.

“We don’t believe in bubble wrapping our clients,” says Heather Fotion, a licensed therapist and manager of the Collegebound Program. “Our clients learn to live life while negotiating deep clinical work, while negotiating being in school.”

For most Collegebound participants, the last time they were in school, things didn’t go so well. They failed. They marred their transcripts. They disappointed their parents. Returning to Northbound after a day on campus gives them the chance to process the fears of returning to an environment they haven’t done well in and to learn the skills so they do well this time.

Through Collegebound, clients receive assistance arranging medical leave, ordering transcripts, applying for school, transferring credits, identifying potential scholarships, developing an educational plan, selecting courses and working with their clinical team to make sure returning to school is only adding to their recovery, not distracting from it. Once enrolled, students receive educational coaching, tutoring and supervised study time.

“One of the most important things is that I started and finished my first class while I was in the Collegebound Program,” Boyer says. “I had support from start to finish. Any good alcoholic loves

Collegebound participants continue to engage in all aspects of treatment, including meeting with their therapist, attending groups, engaging in addiction education and working the 12 steps.

to self-sabotage, but I didn’t have that opportunity. I had someone walking alongside me the whole way.”

Boyer received a bachelor degree from the University of Denver in 2014 and spent the next two and a half years managing the program that rejuvenated his passion for education. He’s now enrolled in a master’s program at California State University, Fullerton.

“What really solidified my recovery and invested me in this work was going back to school early on in my treatment,” he says. “It was the benefit of going back to school, re-engaging with real life and feeling passionate about it for the first time in a decade that sustained my recovery. I started to feel confident. I started to have goals that were replacing my apathy. I started to feel successful. Without reinvesting in school, which was frankly an investment in myself, I wouldn’t be sitting here today.” 🧩