

New program helps bring people and solutions together

By: Matthew Robinson

On a damp, dreary day on Boston Common, nearly 100 people gathered to celebrate and bring light and hope to the lives of those living with addictions.

Sponsored by the national Library of Addictions (NLA), Common Ground was a gathering of recovering addicts, medical professionals and other supporters all of whom are dedicated to helping each other deal with this international epidemic.

"The goal for this event is to bring people to common ground," said NLA founder and executive director Dr. P.S. Kishore. Dr. Kishore explained that he wanted to use the term "common" as a theme not only because it is very prevalent in Boston - what with the Boston Common and Massachusetts being a Commonwealth - but also because it is what is needed to help deal with this issue. "There is no one way to deal with addiction," Kishore suggested, "so we all need to come together to make things work." Kishore also noted the fact that the event took place near Boston's famed Freedom Trail. "That is symbolic too," he said, "as we are helping people find their own paths to freedom from addiction."

Among the hundreds of people whom Kishore and his talented team have helped were a young woman named Tanya who is currently living in one of Dr. Kishore's sober houses. "I have been working with Dr. Kishore for five years," said Tanya, who first met Kishore through her aunt. "He saved my life! I am getting back on track by staying clean."

Beth Harper is the director (or "house mother") of the sober house. "We just opened in April," Harper recalls, "and already, we're like a family." That sense of coming together is vital to Dr. Kishore's protocols. "Addiction is so complex and confusing," he said, "there is no one right way, but if we can come together on common ground, we can help." After a brief set by a jazzy combo that drew people from the tent along Tremont Street to the Parker Memorial Bandstand, Cantor Pharrel Wener (a member of Preventive Medical Associates) offered an invocation that included the Jewish prayer for healing of body, mind, and spirit. "The mission of Common Ground," the cantor said, "is to express hope in the war against addiction."

The keynote speaker for the event was Peter Simon, host of WRKO's "Recovery Road." During his extemporaneous speech, Simon recalled episodes in his own life that contributed to his addiction and how he eventually sought help and began his own road to recovery.

"A lot of people are in denial because there is a stigma about asking for help," Simon suggested, noting a recent UPI report that claimed that only one percent of all addicts ever seek help. "We're here today to give a sense that there is hope and a way to turn this around. And the more we get the word out, the more we can help."

Recalling an episode of his radio program on which Dr. Kishore appeared, Simon said that, "when he was on my show, the phones lit up. People are desperate and often don't know where to turn. It's a scary, rocky road."

Despite the fact that his parents both died on account of addictions, Simon admitted that he too fell prey to this diabolical disease. "The seed for addiction had been sown," he said. Though he demonstrated many textbook symptoms of alcohol addiction (e.g., denying his problem, hiding his bottles, etc.), and despite a number of arrests and other personal and professional difficulties, Simon took years to come to the realization that he had to do something about his drinking. "I

was in a Martha's Vineyard jail going through withdrawal," he recalled. "I read about recovery and realized that there was light at the end of the tunnel." Having been a successful photographer even during his years of addiction, Simon wanted to find another creative outlet to dedicate himself to during his recovery. Though early attempts to land a radio gig were squelched, he eventually realized his dream and continued to help himself by helping others who were also dealing with addiction. "I feel very fulfilled doing this show," he says of "Road," which is currently seeking funding for its next season. "I'm here to help." Whether through group homes or on-air talk therapy, there are many ways to deal with addiction. And sometimes, it takes a combination of treatments for someone to make it through. That is why Common Ground is so important. "There may not be one right answer," Dr. Kishore said, "but any answer is a good answer if it helps."

After Simon had told his story, Tanya and some of the other women in the sober house shared theirs as well. When the speeches and stories were over, the assembled joined hands in a Circle of Hope that observed a moment of silence before chanting "The Serenity Prayer." After that, everyone returned to the tent for bag lunches and more sharing. Dr. Kishore hopes that this Common Ground ceremony will become an annual event. "We need a day we can call our own to share stories without stigmas," he suggested. "This is the start of a new beginning where we all come together on common ground."

More information is available at www.commongroundtoday.org