

Seniors



Bottoming out marks a new beginning for veterans at Benilde Hall

In November, the month America has set aside to honor its military veterans, reminders of those who have served in the military are everywhere. There are few reminders, however, of some statistics that tell a sad story. In the Kansas City area alone, there are more than 1,600 homeless veterans, according to a Veterans Administration report.

Most are unemployed addicts whose lives have been ruined by alcohol and drugs, according to Linus Benoit, director of Godfrey S. Kobets-Benilde Hall, a 51-bed transitional living center for the down and out at 3220 E. 23rd St., Kansas City.

"Twenty-three of the 46 residents here now are Vietnam or post-Vietnam-era vets," Benoit said. "Most are in their 40s, although we have several who are older, and most have struggled with drugs or alcohol for a long time — 25 or 30 years. Many have gone through multiple treatments, but they don't usually show up here until they've hit bottom. The younger ones, those in their 20s, usually aren't ready for this yet."

"If you noticed the fellow being admitted, talking to a counselor, you might have noticed he had a black trash bag beside him," Benoit said as he led visitors on a tour of the center. "Most of them, the homeless, come in with that bag and that's it. It's all they've got left. They don't come in with a suitcase. They've bottomed out. But being homeless is not a big deal to a homeless person."

Benilde Hall, located in what was the tiny Queen of the World Hospital in the 1900s, was established in 1986 by Kansas City philanthropist Godfrey Kobets. The center is funded primarily by private donations, although it does receive some government grants.

A referral program Benilde shares with the Kansas City Veterans Administration Medical Center is responsible for placing many of the veterans there.

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reorganize my life, get it back together. I'm now a Level 3 recovering addict."

To reach Level 3, a resident must have been at Benilde Hall for six to 12 months, attend two in-house group sessions each week, and participate in at least one individual counseling session twice a month.

Level 3 residents are expected to continue to meet financial and housing expectations, set goals and plan for a successful discharge. They must actively seek permanent residence, chair a self-help group meeting monthly and undergo regular testing for drug use.

Untermeyer said he now takes life one day at a time, with the hope that someday he will be able to return to Texas to find what's left of his family and maybe become a substance abuse counselor.

Carl Lueke was in Vietnam in 1961 and 1962, and he also spent a year in Korea. The Kansas City native ended up at the VAMC for alcohol-abuse treatment.

David Untermeyer, a Texas native whose heavily lined face bespeaks a life lived outdoors, is one of those veterans. He came back from Vietnam in 1972, already in trouble with drugs and alcohol, he said. He didn't have much family left, and he didn't have a job. He ended up at the VAMC in Kansas City, where he started substance abuse treatment. It was there he learned about Benilde Hall. "It was the best thing that ever happened to me," he said. "It's helped me

On the cover: Benilde Hall director Linus Benoit (standing) enjoys hearing about the accomplishments of residents Carl Lueke (left) and David Untermeyer.

Top: Benilde Hall resident Anthony Miller, a recovering alcoholic and a licensed electrician, puts his talents to work wiring apartments being built for house residents who are ready to leave the hall but aren't ready to be on their own.
 Right: Counseling sessions, conversation and comfortable time spent together are part of the healing atmosphere at Benilde Hall.

Photos by Rebecca Friend/The Star

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"At one point it was so bad there was some talk of sending me to one of the homeless missions downtown, and I said 'Wait a minute. I'm not sure that's the best option for me just yet.' I didn't know how far down I'd gone, and then I found out about Benilde Hall. We vets say it's Kansas City's best-kept secret. It's kind of a little oasis down here."

The men spend a lot of time together, talking, watching television and attending counseling sessions, Benoit said. The veterans, with many shared experiences, good and bad, offer great support to one another.

He said the veterans don't blame the war or their service in the military for their homelessness and addictions, but rather acknowledge that they "fell in with the wrong crowd" and made lifestyle choices which led them down the wrong paths.

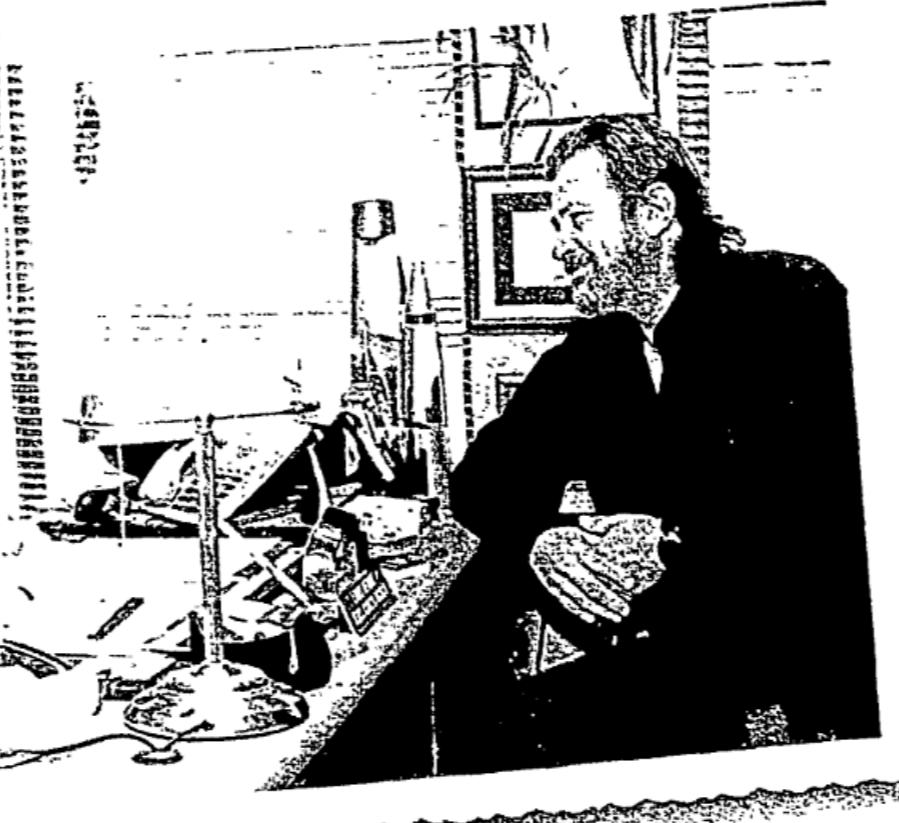
Most of the veterans who pass through Benilde Hall are dealing with addiction to drugs rather than alcohol, he said. "With many of the others it's alcohol, but the vets are in trouble with drugs. Crack cocaine's the worst, and then it's marijuana and then methamphetamine. It's often in combination with alcohol, but the drugs are there."

Benoit himself is a recovering alcoholic, although he's not a veteran. "When I finally got treatment was when my wife kicked me out," he said. "That was my bottom. These guys have to realize that — before they're ready to change."

In an effort to keep up with the epidemic of homelessness in Kansas City, the staff and board of directors at Benilde recently purchased a parcel of land across the street, enlarging a piece of property that already belonged to the center. Now the sound of hammers and drills rings out as workers, including one Benilde Hall resident, erect a building that will house 12 studio apartments for residents who are transitioning to independent living.

Kansas City architect Allan Present has donated much of his time over the last three years to the project, and he charged minimal rates for the rest, Benoit said. The apartment building has a lot of brick, oversized windows, open areas and a meeting room upstairs for counseling sessions and daily Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings.

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People living in the new housing will have attained Level 4 in the Benilde program. Although they've completed the three-step program offered at the center, some are not quite ready to deal with society on their own. They will pay rent and sign admittance agreements rather than lease agreements, meaning they will agree to attend required sessions and abstain from substance abuse. They must work or continue to seek employment.

Getting into Benilde Hall isn't easy, Benoit said. Although the city has many treatment centers, Benilde is one of the most sought-after. For veterans, their veteran status must first be verified. Then they are evaluated by a VA addiction counselor and admitted into the VAMC substance Treatment program.

Veterans have to stay drug-free for at least 14 days before being eligible for placement at Benilde.

Construction on Benilde House apartments, which will house residents who have completed initial programs, is due to be completed next spring.

At Benilde, a panel screens all referred veterans before admitting them. Those who are admitted say they feel hopeful, often for the first time, Benoit said.

"It's sad, but very few, maybe 10 percent, ever get back to their families," he said. "That's not to say they don't get their lives back on track, but so many are alien-

ated from the people they care about. They've lied to them, stolen from them and relapsed over and over, all because of addiction. It's never easy for them. But we do what we can here."

For more information, call (816) 842-5836 or visit www.benildehall.org.



Photo by Rebecca Friend/The Star