

THE HISTORY OF THE STARTING POINT



STARTINGPOINT
Improving Lives One by One



by Vince DiPasquale

Everything started way back in 1976, when Norm D. took me to an AA meeting in Philadelphia, called The Mustard Seed. After the meeting, Norm gave me a little mustard seed and told me that if I planted it, it would grow into a tree that would bring shade and comfort to many. Norm also invited me to attend a meeting of a small group of individuals at St. Luke's hospital in Philadelphia. At the meeting, they were discussing wanting to open a house for men coming out of detox. I was told that I should oversee this house, and of course, I said yes! One of the individuals at that meeting had a house donated to us. It was located at 1739 S. 23rd St. and later we would also acquire the property at 1741 S. 23rd. With the help of some very special people and the South Philadelphia AA group, we went to work on the houses.

The name 'Starting Point' came into existence when we went for state certification and chose the name 'The Point'. But we were told that we could not use the name because ironically, there was a bar in the area with that same name! And thus, The Starting Point of Philadelphia was born. We applied for tax exemption from the federal government and six months later, we became a 501C non-profit organization.

Our group was graced with so many special people who were to become a big part of our history, Bob M., John Rogers C., Ed M., Gussie, and all the members of the South Philadelphia group. When we needed things, someone always stepped up. Russell was able to borrow 75 gallons of green lead-based paint, and so we turned the houses green, inside & out! We were able to get cases of dented cans from Campbell's Soup. The only problem was, they weren't labeled, so we just got a large pot, opened the cans, and mixed the contents together. We called it 'recovery soup'. One of the members worked at Acme. He told us to back up our station wagon to the back of the store at the end of the day. He would fill it with vegetables and day-old bread. With these donations and the guys' welfare checks and food stamps, we were able to make it, with the help of God and Saint Michael.

With faith and trust, miracles continued to happen. One day there was a knock at the door, and when I answered, a man said, "What do you need?" I said, some new windows and a roof repair. He gave us a check for \$10,000 and said that recovery had given him a new life, and he just wanted to give back. He asked to keep the gift anonymous. That house grew to a point that nobody wanted to leave. We rented another house down the street and were able to house 18 men. For those that 'graduated', we began a daily out-patient program. The guys would come 5 days per week from 9 to 4. This was when I began my first lecture series at the house. "Spirituality and the Twelve Steps" was the name of the first talk. My lectures went public in 1981, when I was asked to give a lecture in a rehab called Riverside House, on Spirituality. That lecture, the miracle that it was, is still the foundation of all my lectures today.

Putting the program together and the house together was almost a full-time job. Some very special people helped to support our first out-patient program ~ Gus E., John C., Bob M., Sadye P., and of course, the great members of the South Philadelphia group. The bulk of our work was to help the men with the basics of life ~ personal hygiene, some cooking, how to maintain and manage an apartment. We would send them to many meetings by public transportation. We were slowly building a Starting Point family, and no one ever wanted to leave.

In 1981, the Bishop of Camden, NJ, gave me an ultimatum. I worked it out with him that I would continue to work at Starting Point for five days per week, and work in parishes on the weekends. The first parish that I was sent to was St. Anthony's in Waterford, NJ. Back at the house in Philly, Joe D. became the house manager. We had to make some house rules, there were so many men.

Now that I was working in NJ, too, I began to give weekly lectures at Christian Brothers Bookstore in Haddon Heights. In a matter of weeks, it was so crowded, that we moved to the Friends Meeting House in Haddonfield, while also giving lectures at Charter Fairmont Hospital in Roxboro, Pa. In 1882-83, we started a small out-patient counseling program at Dr. Mark Stern's office in Camden, NJ. We still had our Philly houses and later that year we began the lecture series at St. Aloysius Church in Oaklyn. We moved our offices to Collingswood, and 2 counselors came on board, Theresa Barrett, and Margaret Graham. Our quarters were so tight that we had our coffee bar in the bathroom! Theresa put plywood over the bathtub for a counter.

By 1985, it was time to begin closing the houses in Philly, because we were reported to License & Inspections, and we didn't have the funds to make the required changes that L&I wanted.

We had three men left when the houses closed, so we rented a house in South Philly where they could live. A special couple named Eddie & Marge took care of them until they passed on.

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In 1999, we moved to our current quarters at 215 Highland Ave in Haddon Township. We now have four group rooms and 24 counseling offices. More than 23 groups meet weekly. Our parking lot is always full.

A very important fact is that we've never taken any funding from the state or federal government. We are a non-profit center that specializes in referral services and education. Our counselors are each in private practice. I have often said that with the Higher Power and through faith and trust, we have always been able to pay our bills and be of service to others. The community of people that we serve has a way of giving back and helping with fundraising. God has not only been our guide but has been a strong teacher to us on our journey.

As we continue to celebrate our 47th anniversary, we dedicate our program in a spirit of gratitude, humility, acceptance, and love. May God bless and guide us on our journey today and every day. Thank you, God, for our roots in South Philadelphia to where we are today. We pray to be open to where the Starting Point journey will go.