

Area Narcotics Anonymous celebrates its tenth year

By Connie McNamara
Sunday Patriot-News

They say they had used drugs so long, they no longer believed it was possible to live without them.

Some of them were arrested and jailed repeatedly on drug charges or for stealing to get money to buy the drugs.

Others had overdosed and been near death.

They are drug addicts who were able to kick the habit only after they became involved with the local chapter of Narcotics Anonymous.

MEMBERS of the group and their families held a banquet last night to celebrate the Harrisburg area group's 10th anniversary.

Narcotics Anonymous has groups in nine countries. The Harrisburg chapter started 10 years ago when six former addicts began meeting at Holy Spirit Hospital. No professionals are involved in the group, which works on the philosophy that no one can understand an addict better than a former addict.

"There's an instant empathy," one group member said of the meetings. "There are two completely different people and we are basically the same."

MANY of the stories are the same. They started with alcohol and marijuana in their early teens and the abuse continued and expanded until they had lost control of their lives.

Another group member, who has not used drugs in about five years, said he originally came to the group as a way to cut short a prison sentence. After his first meeting, his opinions had changed.

"People were just like me [and they were] staying clean," he said. "They had things I wanted ... They were laughing ... They seemed happy."

In the past five years he has rebuilt his life. He started his own business and is married.

"None of those things are No. 1," he said. "The priority in my life is staying clean. Without that I wouldn't have a wife, I wouldn't have a business, I wouldn't have a home."

THERE are no rules in Narcot-

ics Anonymous, and every one of the 23 local meetings held in churches and hospitals is independent.

The common denominator of all NA groups is that they are based on the same 12 steps as Alcoholics Anonymous, which include realizing the addicts are powerless over their addiction and a turning to a power greater than themselves to fight it.

A female group member remembers her life becoming unmanageable before she attended NA. She said she had sold just about everything she owned trying to get money for the drugs.

"I never realized drugs was what was making my life messed up," she said.

AFTER listening to members of the group, she realized they had been there before and were able to straighten their lives out by quitting drugs.

"People [in the group] understand and accept me," she said. "No one else really understands why we were the way we were."

The members admit that staying clean is not an easy battle. NA recommends that they attend meetings 90 times during their first 90 days. Twenty-three meetings are held locally every week at various times during each day.

"It's not that hard to quit," one woman said. "Staying quit is the hard thing."

The former addicts say that NA's message is one of hope.

The desire to use drugs lessens as time goes on, they admit, but at times it is difficult. When something unpleasant happens, the members admit an occasional temptation to turn to drugs for relief.

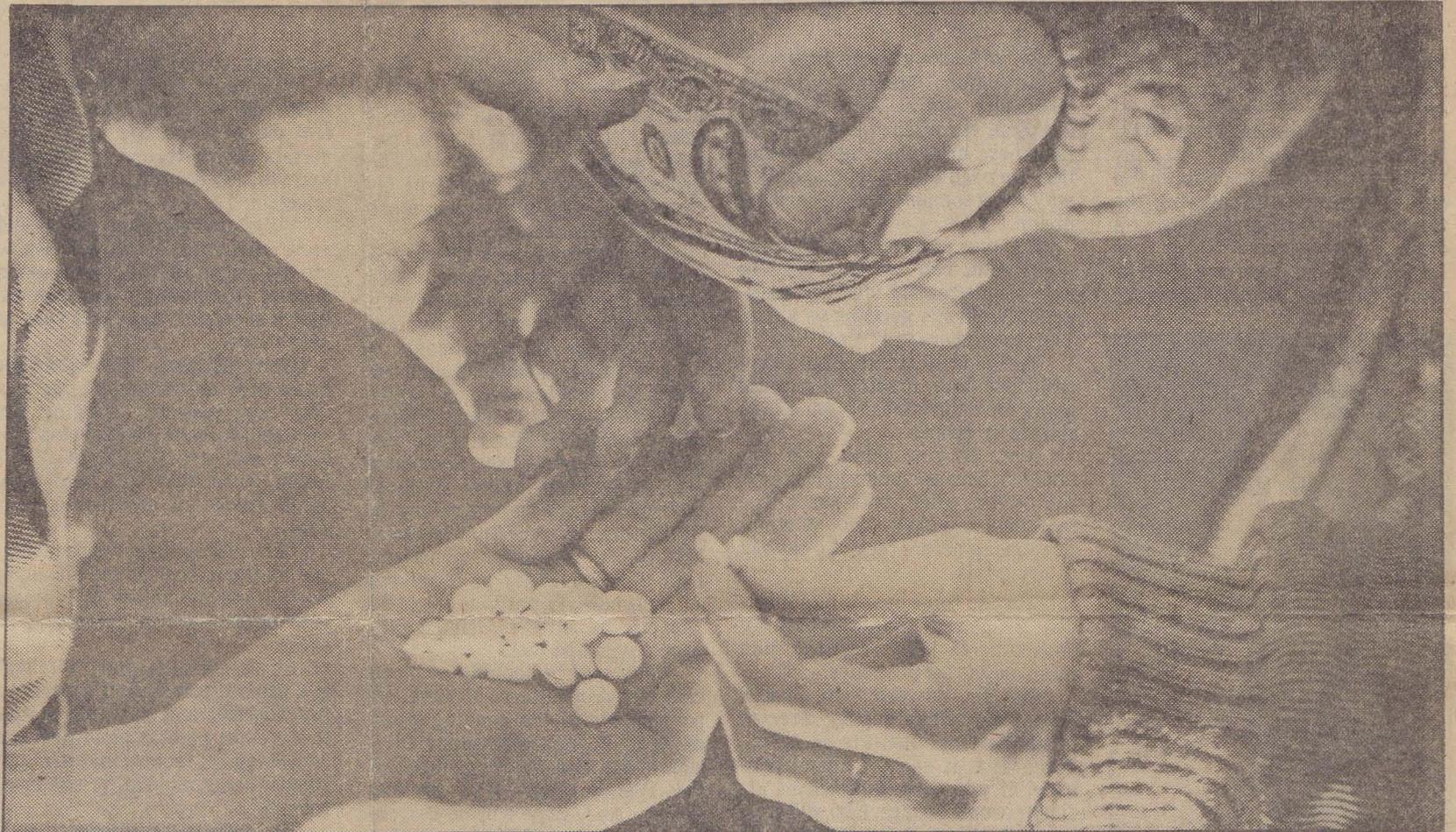
But the group provides support so that its members make other choices.

They say different topics are discussed at each meeting, such as fear and gratitude.

"We are grateful for a new way of life," one member said.

MANY of the members of Narcotics Anonymous are referred to the group by prison, hospital and rehabilitation personnel who know it works, members say.

NA members also have participated in community programs, in-



Money and drugs change hands between pushers and addicts

cluding presentations in schools and prisons. But the group's success was not easy.

Organizations were not anxious to allow a group of drug addicts to meet under their roofs, the members said.

"We couldn't even get people to give us a chance to meet," one member said. She said they owe a great deal to the hospitals and churches that allowed them the space to gather.

"In a way we have to be better people than other people do," she said. "We have to be the best person we can be."

THE MEMBERS would not say what their success rate has been. More than 200 members currently attend meetings, but others have gone in and out of the group, returning to their drug use.

For that reason, newcomers to the group are given a great deal of

attention. The members say they need to show those people that a clean lifestyle is possible, and it is the better way. Some members stop immediately, for others it takes years.

"A lot of people don't come in willing [to quit]," a member said.

Those that do can succeed.

"[It comes from] being real sick of your life being the way it is," a member said. Successful members have accepted this as a way of life, he said.

More information on the group and local meetings is available by calling 233-FREE.

