

A Different Kind of Group Therapy

For the past 25 years, **Leonard Jason** '75 (PhD) has been researching and empowering what is likely the most successful nationwide addiction-recovery program you've never heard of: the Oxford House.

This residential rehab model is soundly rooted in what's called community psychology, a branch of psychology forged in the 1960s by, among others, Rochester's Emory Cowen. Jason, a protégé of Cowen's, is among the leading practitioners of community psychology today. "Psychology is very individually oriented, but the reality is, there's a contextual piece to most mental health problems," Jason says. Community psychologists understand mental health problems as *social* problems, experienced in the context of a community.

A professor of psychology at DePaul University and director of the university's Center for Community Research, Jason first found out about Oxford Houses from a *60 Minutes* special in 1991. He was intrigued. From a community psychology point of view, he wondered, why do they work?

In 1975 the first house opened outside Washington, D.C. An Oxford House is a house like any other, often in the suburbs, where a person can come to live for \$100 per week and a commitment to abstinence from substance use. Essentially Oxford Houses are self-help recovery homes where six to 12 residents work to sustain a substance-free life together. Each house is democratically run by the residents, without professional staff. Today over 25,000 people reside in such houses every year.

SOLVING SOCIAL PROBLEMS: The key to addressing social ills is community psychology, says Jason, a leading expert in the field.

In the early 1990s, Jason began a study of the model with 150 participants in Illinois. Helping Jason recruit participants was Leon Venable. Venable first met Jason in 1993 when he was a resident at an Oxford House. "The first time I met Dr. Jason I was terrified," says Venable. "I had completed high school and six years of military, and I was also addicted to drugs." But Venable's initial apprehensions quickly dissipated. "He was a good listener, and that's what I admire about him the most," says Venable. "Going down and listening to him allowed me to gain a lot of self-confidence."

In the process, Venable learned more about himself. His collaboration with Jason is a perfect example of the power of community psychology. "I was able to go out in the community and promote the Oxford Houses," says Venable, "I was able to do better presentations of what Oxford Houses could do for an individual based on working with Dr. Jason." Today, Venable is the president of Kalimba House Corporation, a nonprofit that oversees the Oxford Houses throughout Illinois.

The results of Jason's study showed that the supportive community environment of Oxford Houses helped people remain abstinent, out of jail, and employed at much higher rates than if

they went through standard rehab programs. But despite the data-backed success of the Oxford Houses, some communities still stigmatize them. Frightened by the idea of neighbors who are recovering from addictions, many formerly incarcerated, some towns have passed ordinances against the homes.

Jason's work, however, has been instrumental in fighting such laws. He is regularly called in as an expert witness in court cases involving Oxford Houses. One case, which dragged out for months in a suburban community, was resolved in favor of the Oxford House the day that Jason presented his research findings. "In one day they basically solved the problem with data," says Jason.

For Jason, combining outreach, research, and action is a way to democratize psychology and expand its usefulness to people outside the academy. "I can outline a problem, I can collect data on it, and I can add that to the effort to bring about change in a very systematic way," he says.

To address social problems effectively, as he describes in his 2013 book *Principles of Social Change*, environments, not just individuals, must change. "A lot of our mental health and other in-



terventions are limited by being so person-specific," says Jason. It's a challenge because "very powerful people control resources and the status quo.

"You have to have allies and citizens and community groups and people to work with you, to challenge those individuals that are controlling the power to get to more substantial change." [®]

—MAYA DUKMASOVA '12