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Living: Sunday, October 19, 2003

Chef overcomes substance abuse, helps others do the same

By [Marc Ramirez](#)
Seattle Times staff reporter

Their hymn books are as weathered as the lives they've led. But their Sunday-morning suits and freshly slicked hair speak volumes about where these men hope their lives will go next.

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Testimony time. In a back pew of the Salvation Army Rehabilitation Center chapel, Mitchell "Mick" Croy listens as some thank God for turning their lives around or apologize for things they've done. In a gravelly voice, he stands and thanks the Lord for waking up sober, instead of coming out of a drunken haze. "It's a life I never thought I'd have."

This summer, Croy turned 50, but more importantly for him, he marked one year of sobriety. For a guy once headed up the banquet-chef ladder, a lifetime of addiction finally proved a recipe for failure.

That's how he ended up here at the center, a Christian-based residence program whose spiritual leader, Major Samuel Southard, now sermonizes: "In our addiction, we cannot, on our own power, restore our sanity. God can."

Such words have given Croy new life, but every day is a struggle to keep it that way. He checks the clock: Five minutes to 10. Time to get to work. "I gotta feed all these guys," he says. "Believe me, it's a blessing. Keeps me clean."

A success story

In the kitchen, he's master of operations — menu planner, chief buyer, dispenser of culinary proverbs. *Dull knife is the one that cuts ya. Cut toward your buddy, not your body.* Some items are donated, but he eyes bargains — this week it was Roma tomatoes — and his budget averages \$1 a plate.

As usual, today's five-man crew consists of center residents. One is a

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former fast-food manager toppled into homelessness; another, a former culinary student trying to reassemble his life. "I'm trying to get my head back on straight, to get back with God," says Jeffrey Hayes, 29. "This place is gonna save my life."

Croy himself — blond, animated, with fiery eyes and high cheekbones — is a graduate of the program, which has strict curfews and a workbook addressing topics like denial and relapse. The center houses up to 101 men, entirely funded by its adjoining thrift store, where many work in exchange for room and board.

The men can stay for six months up to a year. "This is a place where people come to change their lives, not to be institutionalized," says administrator Southard. "These men deserve better than this."

Some never finish, but program director Warren Terry says the facility graduates more of the 700 men who pass through yearly than any Salvation Army rehab center nationwide.

Croy, one of the successes, works 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., four days a week, plus four hours on Sunday. In his white chef's outfit, he's a towering presence. A small meat thermometer pokes from between buttons of his shirt. Today, he says, "we're gonna do yellow squash and zucchini oven-roasted vegetables. Oh yeah. It's tasty stuff."

He yanks open the ovens. Inside, huge, foil-covered trays harbor the big roasts that got started late because the guys didn't get their early wake-up call. Too late to worry about that: "We need to pull those roasts out and cut 'em in half and throw 'em in again," Croy says. "They'll cook faster in separate pans."

Big knives slicing through the meat. Inside, the color is a deep, purplish red. Back in they go, resisting completion until the bitter end.

The breaking point

As a little kid, Croy remembers his stepdad entertaining big groups, Sunday brunch flambés and sparks flying into the crowd. The man, he says, could land a job just by walking into a diner and making a pot of soup.

But the man was also a drinker, and when Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, 10-year-old Croy was sent home from school. He found his stepdad and his Air Force buddies awash in liquor; before long, they were betting who could chug beer faster, Croy or his brother.

Life became a blur. "I can't drink like normal people," he says. "I take one drink, and the craving kicks in, and then I don't know where I'm going. I could end up on the six o'clock news."

Then came marijuana, cocaine, heroin. "It was like a shooting gallery in my house," says former girlfriend Karen Wagener, now married and living in Salkum, Lewis County. "People coming in and out. I couldn't take it anymore."

Croy tried geographic change, switching jobs, joining the service, but he couldn't escape his problem. He ended up in jail on drug charges.

A new start

Eventually, he landed a job in a Spokane hotel kitchen. A new head chef fired nearly everyone but took Croy under his wing, teaching him how to flambé, sauté, how to do sides and foie gras.

One day, the guy led him out to a semi-trailer. "He says, 'You need to learn how to core fruit. You leave too much meat on the fruit.' I chopped and peeled and cored fruit for nine and half hours," Croy says. "After that I could pop out a fruit tray in 10 minutes. And people would ask if it was machine-sliced."

For seven years Croy stayed employed, knocking out big banquet presentations until his partying finally caught up with him. He returned to Seattle in summer 2001. Tired of running, he intentionally drove into a speed trap with a gin-and-tonic in his hand.

I'm a drunk, he told the officer. Help me.

No problem, the officer said.

'Something more to this man'

The judge looked at Croy's criminal record; it showed a guy wreaking perpetual havoc. Six months in jail, she said.

Last December, Croy returned to court for a follow-up and recounted how far he'd come. In jail, he'd been given kitchen duty, turning the place around. But his first stint at the rehab center didn't take, and he flamed out again, falling to such depths that he knew he had to make a choice.

"When he came back, he was beaten down worse than before," says rehab director Terry. "He came to the realization that, 'If I don't stop, I'm gonna die.' "

Now he'd been sober for nearly seven months, about to finish rehabilitation. By the time he was done telling his tale, the courtroom was in tears, including the judge.

"She said, 'That's why I don't do weddings,' " Croy says. "She called me her knight in shining recovery."

Says ex-girlfriend Wagener, who was there: "I knew there was something more to this man. I never lost faith in what he could accomplish."

Back where he belongs

Early this year, Croy had a job pricing Salvation Army thrift-store collectibles when Southard called: The kitchen manager had just been let go; would he want the job?

He went to town, tearing apart the walk-in freezer like he was tossing a salad, rearranging items to avoid spoilage. Boxes of Jell-O and coffee, once left on the floor, were put on shelves where they belonged. "Now," he says

victoriously, "I'm in my environment. *And* I'm clean and sober."

Has other plans

For Croy, sobriety has been a new high, like stepping from the cyclone into the wonder of Oz. Someday, he says, he imagines opening a clean-and-sober nightclub, a place with music and atmosphere, but for now, he likes being a mentor for the guys. It's a key ingredient in the slow, but steady, rebuilding of his life.

"You see 'em change. You see 'em grow. I think it's OK that I'm not out there at some big hotel. I've had offers. I made a two-year commitment here, and I'm gonna do at least that."

Says Terry: "He could be in a big, fancy restaurant. But he knows who he is, and he knows where that would take him. It's almost like a lifeline for him to stay connected here. It's a reminder of where he came from."

Croy goes to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings five nights a week and, between meals, counsels residents through chapters of the center's recovery-minded workbook.

"One of the best ways to maintain your recovery is to give it to somebody," he says. "I've been walking in the woods for 30 years. It's going to take me a while to get out."

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