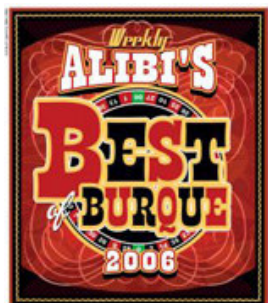


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Endorphin Power Company

"When things piss me off I act on them," Sam Slishman says. He was explaining why he invented and patented a collapsible ski pole that can function as a splint for broken leg bones, but he's also shedding light on the reason why he's spent the last two years working on solutions to Albuquerque's persistent problem with substance-dependent homeless people. Right now, intoxicated transients are constantly cycled through the Bernalillo County Detention Center and UNM Hospital's emergency room. The situation is extremely expensive and does little, if nothing, to help treat a deeply troubled segment of the population.



A couple of years ago, Dr. Sam Slishman had a brainstorm and decided he wanted to build a public fitness center that would connect exercise equipment to generators that could produce electricity. Then, after more thought, he realized that exercise could be a useful treatment for people dealing with alcohol and drug addictions, the kind of people he sees regularly as an emergency room physician at UNM Hospital.

Around the same time, Mayor Martin Chavez convened a summit on behavioral health and the homeless; Bernalillo County managers began weekly meetings on how to deal with the same problems. It was determined that Albuquerque needed a medically managed detox program, a 28-day treatment course and a four- to six- month transitional housing program. We had none of those services. The city had tried to create a solution, but they couldn't get any neighborhood to agree to accept a facility.

In July, Bernalillo County bought the former Charter Hospital at San Pedro and Cardenas SE, with the intention of turning it into a treatment center.



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According to John Dantis, Deputy Bernalillo County Manager for Public Safety, Slishman was instrumental in securing community support. He knocked on doors, he charmed, cajoled and eventually convinced the leaders of a coalition of neighborhood associations that they fully supported the proposed Metropolitan Assessment and Treatment Services facility (MATS). In other words, he got people in an area formerly known as the War Zone to say they wanted the city and the county to bring drunk, drug-addicted, mentally ill homeless people into their neighborhood. He did it simply by convincing them that a full-service, large-scale, integrated program like MATS was the long-term solution to a very difficult problem.

For the better part of 2004, Albuquerque and Bernalillo County have been working together on creating an integrated treatment facility; the details of exactly who will do this and who will pay for that are still to be resolved. I talked to representatives from both and in describing this long, difficult process, they made sure to speak politely of each other. But they positively *gushed* about Sam Slishman and how he helped overcome what had been an insurmountable obstacle with placing the facility. Slishman and his colleagues have also been working with John Dantis to develop a medical advisory board for MATS and help incorporate medical treatment into the existing social detox program.

Both Dantis and Barry Bitzer, an advisor to the mayor who has been working on the project for the city, also spoke highly of Slishman's own organization, Endorphin Power Company (EPC). Endorphin's work will supplement the programs at MATS and help people leaving the center to stay sober and become self-supporting.

John Dantis believes the program will become a model for the state and perhaps the country. The doctor's public fitness center idea eventually evolved into a community center that will have a symbiotic relationship with MATS. One of the neighborhood doors Slishman knocked on belonged to a man who owned a vacant building directly across the street from the MATS site. He ended up selling the 11,000 square foot building to Slishman's nonprofit.

For months now, EPC volunteers have been working to renovate the sprawling, rambling building, knocking down walls, installing fire doors, replacing toilets, painting and landscaping. When the building is ready, probably early next year, it will have space for 12-step meetings, a computer room with Internet access, a full kitchen, and yes, an exercise room. EPC volunteers will help MATS clients with their transition back into the community. Dantis calls it "a tremendous collaboration between the private and public sector."

Slishman still works part time at UNM (mostly for the benefits, he says), putting in one or two night shifts a week. The rest of his time he spends on EPC, which is funded by about \$50,000 of his own start-up money, along with a \$35,000 grant from the McCune Charitable Trust and \$50,000 from The Daniels Fund.

There is still a lot of work to be done on the building, which they hope to have up and running at the same time as the government-run facility across the street. Then, there are plans for a 20-unit short term housing facility on the property. He believes that by providing detox services, MATS and EPC will have a strong and obvious positive impact on the community as a whole, but especially the emergency medical services community. After that's in motion, maybe then Slishman will have time to hook up those exercise machines to generators. (GD)

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