

## “Powering Recovery: The Endorphin Power Company”

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**Description:** The Endorphin Power Company offers a sober living community in the heart of downtown Albuquerque, New Mexico. It was founded by an emergency room physician who wanted to make a difference in the lives of people using substances before they reached the ER doors. The program offers an approach to recovery from substance dependency powered by the four pillars of education, exercise, community, and service.

### **Content:**

Dr. Sam Sliselman is a man on a perpetual goodwill quest - not only in the way he lives his own life, but also in the many ways he helps others to excel. The emergency room physician is founder of a non-profit agency called the [Endorphin Power Company \(EPC\)](#) in Albuquerque, NM. The 18-unit sober living community is dedicated to promoting healthy living, healthy connections, and environmental consciousness, with a special focus on those experiencing substance dependency and homelessness.

Sam says he witnessed a repeated pattern of intoxicated patients posing a huge burden on ER staff, hospital revenue, space, and creating longer lines in the waiting room. Moreover, after the discharge papers are signed, people experiencing acute intoxication often return to the same problems that got them to the ER in the first place.

“EPC was largely a reaction to my job as an ER physician,” recalls Sam. “It seems like an awful lot of problems come to emergency departments as a result of drug and alcohol use. I wanted to address it a little bit upstream, instead of just with a band aid.”

In 2003 Sam started a listserv to generate discussion among those interested in making a difference. The nonprofit was formed in 2003, acquired its facilities in 2004 and opened the doors as a public community center in 2005. In 2008, it opened the transitional living program. EPC is located in the heart of what was previously called the city’s “War Zone,” but in 2009 was renamed the “International District.” During their stay, residents are encouraged to follow EPC’s Four Pillars: Education, Exercise, Community, and Service.

EPC has grown into a magnet for support groups that rent meeting space on a sliding-scale fee. Over the years EPC has hosted a lecture series, a book club, a film group, yoga classes, and an acudetox clinic. The 11,000-square-foot main building contains a library, computer room with Internet access, community meeting room, a kitchen, art gallery, and art studio. EPC’s campus showcases a xeriscaped garden and courtyard complete with a performing stage that doubles as a climbing wall in its upright position.

The campus features a state-of-the-art gym equipped with cardio machines set up to generate electricity. "It's partially a philosophical statement," says Sam. "People can go to the gym and have a sense of contribution."

Athletic himself, Sam determined early on that exercise could be a key component in residents' success. He cites to a Duke University study showing that a half-hour of brisk exercise three times a week is as effective as drug therapy in relieving the symptoms of depression. He also notes findings from the University of Heidelberg, Germany that show increased endorphin levels help reduce alcoholic cravings and anxiety during withdrawal.

"I realized it could be a useful treatment modality for substance-dependent people," Sam explains. "Perhaps replacing exogenous opiates (heroin, methadone, oxycodone, etc.) with endogenous opiates (endorphins) could help people to escape their addictions."

This approach is working for Max (his name has been changed), a resident who came to EPC following a 24-year-long methamphetamine addiction. "Exercise is a huge, integral part of my day," says Max. "It helps me sleep, it helps my depression and just helps me be in a better mood all around. I wasn't exercising at all before I got here. I'm a completely different person."

Nearly everyone who provides services or leads support groups at EPC is a volunteer, including Sam, who has contributed a significant amount of his own money to the program. One of those volunteers is Dr. Ruben Last, a general surgeon at the VA Medical Center. He's been interested in EPC since the listserv days nearly a decade ago. He says EPC's non-judgmental vibe and community involvement are paramount to its ability to thrive.

"It's a communalistic model, social model, everybody-is-a-family model," says Ruben. "Every rehab would do well to have a community center and community involvement. We're not polished, we're not slick. We're real. And, people have fun."

There are no pretenses, no labels at EPC. Everyone is on a first-name basis. "We really try not to label anyone," explains Sam.

EPC's dynamic has effects beyond its campus, according to Police Sergeant Jeff Lepori, who is also an EPC volunteer helping out with fund-raising events. "There are great people here trying to do the right thing. It helps public safety in general," says Jeff. "There is a benefit to society as a whole. I'd like to see this place grow and be bigger and better."

Plans are already in the works to expand with a 1,200-square-foot, multi-use medical clinic that will offer basic medical and dental services on-site for residents and the community.

In addition, EPC will be sponsoring a conference scheduled for May 14-20, 2011 called The Osler Symposium at the Sheraton Albuquerque Airport Hotel. Named for Sir William Osler (a Canadian physician, pathologist, educator, bibliophile, historian, author and renowned practical joker), the symposium will address the crisis of clinical physicians in the US -- especially in primary care -- who are struggling with burnout and/or considering leaving the practice of medicine.

As Sam forges on in his quest to help others, he says he benefits too. "I've learned a lot," he says. "It's always nice to see somewhere you can make a tweak and a difference. The achievement is something I didn't plan. EPC has become a wonderful mechanism for gathering the most caring, creative, good people I've ever met."