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[Home](#) > [Saratoga News Home](#) > [Style](#)

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STYLE

Program gives families reason to celebrate

By Michele Tjin

It all started as a personal recovery from alcohol. Saratoga resident Rosemary Tisch was determined not to have her own children be addicted to alcohol as she was, even though her research told her they had a good chance of becoming addicts themselves.

Her fear led to her 25 years of working with alcoholics and their families in the Bay Area. Now her work is spreading. Tisch is going national.

Tisch is the force behind Celebrating Families, a 16-week program that addresses the needs of children and parents in families that have serious problems with alcohol and other drugs. It was created at the request of a Santa Clara County judge who wanted a program for the Family Treatment Drug Court. Celebrating Families now serves clients from all courts in Santa Clara County. Last month, Celebrating Families was acquired by the National Association for Children of Alcoholics, which will produce and distribute the curriculum and introduce it to other state and federal agencies.

"That's a big deal," Tisch said. "It's a significant growth for the program. We're proving that it works."

The program is made up of 16 sessions, in which children and their substance-abusing parents come together for a family meal. After eating, the family members are broken up into age groups to discuss topics such as nutrition, anger management and facts about alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. To conclude, the families come back to participate in a family activity to put into practice what they learned during the discussion.

What makes this program different from other drug prevention programs is that it involves the entire family, Tisch said.

"People are recognizing that children of addicts are at risk for future addiction," she said. "We can no longer say that children aren't affected. We show that working with the family works."

Tisch, who has a master's degree in counseling psychology, has made it her job to develop programs to break the cycle of addiction. In 1999, she wrote the curriculum for a freshman course aimed at preventing addictions at Saratoga High School. From 2000 to 2005, she traveled to Russia to train psychologists and ministers to use a chemical dependency prevention program she developed for 10 Moscow school districts.

Based on the success other professionals saw in her work in Moscow, she was asked to replicate a similar program here in Santa Clara County. Judge Len Edwards, who has since retired as supervisory judge for the Santa County Juvenile Dependency Court, asked Tisch to come up with a model for his Family Treatment Drug Court. EMQ, House on the Hill and Friends Outside, which works with families affected by incarceration, are three local agencies that have been crucial in executing the program.

Cari Santibanes, director of programs at Friends Outside, said Tisch's program provides clients not just with knowledge, but also essential life skills. Families learn how to set goals, and parents understand the importance of advocating for their children at school if they need special help. The results she's seen are promising, she said.

"Once a family commits to doing this, they buy into it," Santibanes said. "Parents want to be with their families in a healthy and structured way. They're parenting sober and clean for the first time, and they learn tools that they integrate into their lives as the entire family gets healthy."

Tisch doesn't work on Celebrating Families by herself. She has several local supporters who sit on her advisory committee, including Mary Gardner, the retired superintendent of the Saratoga Union School District.

Tisch has also learned that alcoholism does not discriminate. She was an active alcoholic for seven years, she said, and the disease also affected several of her relatives.

"No one is safe," she said. "Just because we have high incomes, it doesn't mean we're safe. It's an equal opportunity disease."

To see her Celebrating Families program be adopted on a national level has been validation for her work, Tisch said. Rehabilitating families after substance abuse has been her life's mission.

"It was a dream to have a program specifically to help the family heal," she said.

After being alarmed that her demons could haunt her children, Tisch has worked so that other families have the tools to be healthy.