

# In OTR, 'three-quarter' house is full of heart

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(Photo: Heather Ruschman/Provided)

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Hundreds of recovering alcoholics and addicts place the start of their sobriety at Charlie's  $\frac{3}{4}$  House, which is in fact a full house, nearly always at capacity.

The residential facility with the quirky name has 17 apartments able to house 53 people – and nearly always does.

The second part of the name is the easiest to explain.

"There's halfway houses, three-quarter houses," says Andy Nortker, director. "They both provide a safe environment for people in the early stages of recovery from alcoholism and drug addiction. This isn't a halfway house, where it's a lockdown."

Charlie is something of a mystery. Nortker won't provide Charlie's last name, but not because of the protocols of Alcoholics Anonymous. Charlie's last name goes unstated because Nortker doesn't know it.

"A fellow by the name of Charlie started to help a couple of old drunks," Nortker says. "He took a couple of drunks upstairs. He died shortly thereafter. We've done as much research as we could. His name is lost. He was in the picture just a short period of time."

Or perhaps a bit longer. The organization's Web page describes the early days this way: "Over the next 10 years, Charlie slowly converted his row house at 2121 Vine St. into a safe haven that could house up to 15 newly recovering alcoholics."

Whoever Charlie was and whatever his longevity, the work he started continues 35 years later, on a larger and more formal scale, in the same building where Charlie started it, at 2121 Vine St., Over-the-Rhine. It also

continues in several other buildings, contiguous to Charlie's old lodgings, purchased in the early 1990s. Darrel Hill, board president, says the organization is in the process of purchasing another building to house alumni.

"It's a building up the street that will be for people with longer-term sobriety, seven men, alumni without any place to go," he says.

Charlie's  $\frac{3}{4}$  House offers transitional housing for men who might otherwise be homeless due to addiction. Current residents are ages 19 to 70, according to Nortker. Alcoholism isn't the only path to residence.

"A lot of those suburban kids are using heroin now," Nortker says. "We have a few of them here."

Nor can the residents be easily classified. "We get all walks of life here," Nortker says. "We've had a lawyer here. We've had a doctor here."

The treatment plan focuses on the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Residents must attend six AA meetings a week. They also must submit to random testing for substance abuse, comply with a curfew, pay rent and find jobs.

"We don't require rent out of them in the beginning," Nortker says. "I have guys here that can't seem to get work over a period of time. Then I have other places they can go to get work."

Charlie might have been practicing simple kindness when he started, but the house that bears his name is not for slouches. Charlie's  $\frac{3}{4}$  House has 19 house rules, violation of any of which will result in expulsion, and 11 individual rules, such as daily bed-making and bed checks for "lights out."

The rules also require residents to help one another. New residents, usually unemployed, need help, Nortker says. "It's up to the people in that room to sustain that person until he can advance in recovery and getting a job," he says.

Nortker means carrying the new man's load, providing food, until he can do it himself. "It's people helping people," he says. "That's what we're working toward – helping people become productive members of society."

Charlie's  $\frac{3}{4}$  House does not seek or accept government funding. "We don't want to be told what to do," Hill says.

Eighty-one percent of the organization's income comes from rent paid by residents, 11 percent from contributions, 4 percent from vending-machine sales and 4 percent from alumni, according to its website.

"We know what we're doing," Nortker says. "We're self-sustaining."

Nortker is the only paid staff member. A staff of eight volunteers do bed checks, random testing for substance abuse and other tasks.

Before becoming director, Nortker volunteered as leader of a weekly Alcoholics Anonymous meeting at the house. "A lot of these men knew me here from AA meetings on Monday nights," he says.

In addition to serving residents, Charlie's  $\frac{3}{4}$  House welcomes others seeking sobriety.

"We've built sort of an AA center here for Over-the-Rhine," Nortker says. "If you drive by at 8 o'clock in the morning, you'll see anywhere from 30 to 45 people coming in. Some of them will be residents here, but the rest of them walk up the street here."

The facility's 12-member board includes 11 people recovering from addiction, one a former resident.

"I am a recovering alcoholic," Hill says. "This is the greatest gift I have ever been given."

Nortker, who once lived in a halfway house, says he has been sober for more than 30 years.

Charlie's ¾ House has high standards for success, including payment of rent owed.

"Twenty-five percent are leaving on a good note, a note of recovery," Nortker says. "A lot of guys will come here, get their lives somewhat in order. Once they get their first check, they're gone. They don't meet their financial responsibilities. They make the wrong decisions or are selfish."

Even so, the true success stories mean lives reclaimed.

"We have a fellow here who was two and a half years under a bridge," Nortker says. "He has graduated from Cincinnati State."

A blog called [cargocollective.com](http://cargocollective.com), written by Joe – his last name, like Charlie's, not given – credits the facility with giving him a second chance.

"Charlie's saved my life," says one blog post. "Better yet, the director and residents at Charlie's saved my life."

That's not to say recovery from addiction is breezy. Joe's blog recounts the trying circumstances under which he arrived.

"Andy (Nortker) has a giant heart and has + 20 years' sobriety," the blog says. "He's also a bit grumpy. When I met him, I didn't see the big heart. I saw a gritty older man waiting to throw me out." ■

For more information, or to contribute, visit [www.charlies3-4.org](http://www.charlies3-4.org).