Alcoholic Rehabilitation Center

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During spring vacation a native student at Unviersity of Alaska decided to go on a drinking binge. He overdid it, missed a week of school but returned in time to complete the semester with top grades.

The faculty would probably be surprised to learn their straight-A student was a resident of the Alcoholic Rehabilitation Center run by COMPAS at 1030 Second Avenue.

That two years ago he had been just about written off by society. And that his mid-semester drinking bout was a real victory because he recovered and made up for lost time.

COMPAS stands for Community Property and Service Corp. It was established by various churches in Fairbanks but funded through public and private agencies. The alcoholism program is just one of many the agency sponsors but through it COMPAS is becoming a watchword in the bush.

In March the Alaska Native Brotherhood of Juneau gave COMPAS a vote of confidence for its rehab work. Sen. Don Young of Ft. Yukon is trying to promote a Detox center in Fairbanks patterned along COMPAS dimensions because he feels the organization has really been successful in his area.

And several native villages sent representatives for training at the center who are now

Rehabilitation . . .

quietly at work using COMPAS methods in the bush.

"Alcoholism is our number one health problem," begins Bob Carroll, executive director of the agency. "But most people are not prepared to deal with it except in terms of morals or law. Medical schools, for the most part, have ignored the problem and now we're paying the price."

Standard stateside techniques have failed with the native population here, he maintains.

"Alcoholics Anonymous at its inception was geared to the skid row bum of the South 48. Then it became apparent the real alcoholic problem was the American middle class and, by and large, the program became geared to that. A few natives manage to hack it at AA but the majority don't."

Carroll doesn't believe enforced sobriety is the answer to drinking problems in the north.

"Most Indians learned to drink in the semi-annual binge fashion. Generally they drank for effect not for social reasons. Hallucinagenics were used by these people long before the Russians. The pattern was firmly established by the time of the American purchase.

"You must drink quick before some missionary or teacher takes it away from you... Of course the binge pattern isn't once a year any more. The cash flow is steadier."

It's Carroll's theory this drinking habit is too set to be broken in many cases.

"By the time men come to use the effect of this drinking pattern is engrained and chances of being a social drinker are pretty remote. If you're not going to get over it, then you learn to live with it."

Which is what COMPAS is all about. There is no preaching that it's sinful to drink. No harping on the Puritan ethic. Instead the agency works to change the life style of an alcoholic.

"You have to find some alternative to Second Ave. and the bars. We concentrate on education and vocational training. Attempt to take away much of the guilt since this in itself is a good reason to continue drinking."

Problem drinkers begin working with a group of men who have run the same course.

"From the time a guy is dry we decrease emphasis on the bottle. Once he's capable of working on a one to one basis we concentrate on the individual personality."

There are many approaches. Sometimes finding a job is the answer but more often additional training is needed.

"The agencies don't see education as a reasonable alternative to employment but we're coming more and more to the idea we need our own vocational program."

Carroll believes there has to be some very basic changes of attitude before rehabilitation programs can work in many villages.

"Responsible people in a lot of communities do not choose to recognize the problem of Second Avenue," he maintains.

And until you admit drinking is a problem, how can you solve it?