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TOP STORY

Shift in probation is tied to journeys of recovery

By NOAH CULLEN Staff Writer
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Michael Wernet, 55, tells his story to the Arizona City Fire District on June 22 in Arizona City.

Courtesy of Michael Wernet

FLORENCE — A seminal moment for Michael Wernet, 55 — a man who in 2023 had been addicted to opioids for decades, had been in and out of jail and had gone through numerous treatment programs — came when, in a drunken blackout, he recalled, he reached out and grabbed the throat of his own son.

Lately, Wernet had been doing better. After his fourth arrest, he — having served in the Gulf War — was contacted by Veterans Court, a specialty court that convenes to carefully decide next steps for a defendant, and was placed in a Prescott U.S. Veterans Affairs domiciliary, then a sober living home.

He graduated through Veterans Court and got a job working on a ranch, feeding horses and shoveling manure. He began to speak to his son again. Things weren't perfect though, he lost that job a year later after being caught using marijuana. He then started to work for a landscaping company where, for celebration, he and the other guys would drink nightly.

After one of those nights, his son came to calm him down. Wernet said he felt cornered and didn't know it was his son. But he did what he did.

"That was it, I was absolutely done. I had reached my very worst: I ruined my relationship with my wife, I didn't have a connection with my daughter, never met my granddaughters, and the only person in the family who had responded to me with any type of pride and was happy for me was my son and I just destroyed it," he said.

Wernet struggled with substance abuse for decades, before, during and especially after his time in the military. Injuries, one in the military, and one to his back while working at Albertsons in 2005 gave him access to VA opioid painkillers. He would eventually turn to alcohol and later street drugs like meth and heroin.

He had reached the bottom. He was arrested for the last time, for domestic violence. Afterward, he went to Horizon Health and Wellness's Recovery Village for the third time and made a point to get something out of it. He was accepted into an Oxford House, which are homes with a community of those recovering from substance abuse. He really began to flourish. He's been sober since June 26, 2023.

Wernet's nickname is Cowboy, which would be appropriate enough if only attributed to his physical appearance as on one October afternoon, he donned a black cowboy hat atop of which a handy pair of shiny sunglasses stared. His graying brown hair drapes over his shoulders much like his beard, gray and silver, does his chest. The nickname came while working on the ranch and at one time became synonymous with his addiction, with jail. He's redefining it and now has been called the name through his recovery circles — his boss will even say it from time to time, though rarely.

Shift in probation methods

John Fuery is the chief probation officer for Pinal County Adult Probation, where he has worked for 20 years. Over the years, starting out as a probation officer and having experience with younger kids at Juvenile Court Services, Fuery has seen a shift toward a more substantive role on the part of the probation department — reflecting both a statewide and national trend.

Fuery explained, “When I started as a probation officer, it was more compliance based — ‘have you had police contact since I saw you last,’ ‘how’s treatment going,’ ‘have you paid your probation fees?’”

These are important questions, he said, but now are considered to be “checking questions.”

“If you think about those questions, none of them address why someone has ended up on probation, what puts the person at risk of reoffending,” he said.

Fuery spoke about probation officers as coaches, referring to a 2018 paper published by researchers at the University of Cincinnati, Xavier University and Harris County Supervision and Corrections Department in Houston outlining a change in mindset from probation officers being “referees” as opposed to a more active role as a coach. The mindset, as Fuery too explained, involves taking a real life stake into the outcomes of a probation officer’s client, who, at the end of the day, is a fellow community member. Their flourishing does not only benefit themselves but contributes to a more healthy community.

So, when probation officers — or coaches — have conversations with people, what is it they’re looking for?

To put it simply, they’re looking for any antisocial attitude that may inform why they commit crime. These can be things like personality issues such as compulsivity control, who they are associating with, substance abuse, employment, education, family, status, leisure, lack of structured prosocial activities, antisocial behavior, criminal history, etc.

Based on someone’s answers to these questions, probation coaches will reach out to recovery centers, or transitional living like Horizon and Transitional Living Recovery Center in Wernet’s case, though he wasn’t accepted due to his insurance.

According to the Pinal County Attorney’s Office data, about 37% of charged cases are drug offenses, the largest category and more than double the next highest. On top of that, Fuery said, drugs play a role in a large swath of other offenses like thefts, trespassing, burglaries or

violent offenses like assaults. About 60% of cases go to probation, which are typically resolved through plea agreements.

“Everybody uses for different reasons, and really what we’re trying to do is get to the driver, what’s driving this behavior so we can get them the appropriate help,” he said. “Is the appropriate help substance abuse counseling, or is it mental health counseling so you’re not self-medicating?”

It’s a balance though, Fuery said. “You can’t always be a social worker in this job,” Fuery said. “Because there’s going to be times you have to arrest people.”

But “you don’t want everybody to always have that law enforcement hat, ‘like hey, I’m going to catch you messing up’ because the research shows that doesn’t work.”

“We have to have this balanced approach though,” he said. “You wear a law enforcement hat, but you also wear a social worker hat. A judge orders conditions of probation, they expect us to enforce those and we do, you have to hold people accountable.”

Full circles

Brooklyn Elder, 29, spent a couple years on the street in Phoenix after becoming addicted to fentanyl when she was 25. She left her family home, had a few places to stay for a little while, she said, and ended up in her car. But after being arrested, and having her car impounded, she was released onto the radiating concrete.

Her experience of being on the street was constant, nomadic hustle. It was always about being aware of what was going on around her.

“It’s one of those things where you can’t slow down,” Elder said. “So once you get in that cycle, it’s really hard to get out.”

She knew that if she got clean, she had the option of going home. But she didn’t think it was possible.

On the street in Phoenix for two years, her family tried to find her and did try to get her into residential treatment, but she wouldn’t go.

She had a charge in Pinal County, which required her to be transferred to Pinal when she was arrested in Maricopa County. She was sentenced to standard probation in Maricopa but when she got to Pinal one of the times, she was placed into Drug Court, another specialty court like Veterans Court for Wernet. There is also a Mental Health Court and a Domestic Violence Court.

Drug Court placed her in temporary housing, where she stayed for about 50-60 days. Then she was transferred to TLCR. Elder said that the rigor Drug Court provided helped. She was given housing and was required to do one-on-one therapy, she was given two meals a day, transportation, opportunities to apply for jobs and vouchers to buy clothes.

“I personally think that having this much accountability, which was something I hadn’t had in a really long time, really helped,” Elder said. The rigor differed from standard probation, which hadn’t worked for her in the past. She’d been given it, but when it came time to check in with her probation officer, she vanished.

Elder is still based in Casa Grande and now works for Arizona@Work Pinal County, where she encounters people going through much of what she went through.

She tells her clients that she is their biggest cheerleader. She’ll match their energy, meaning she’ll put into it what they put into it. She can’t do anything for them, they have to be the ones to do it.

She often works with people who have never had someone else support them, they never saw that as a possibility.

“Just because they have a past or have been on probation, they still can be successful,” she said. “And a lot of the times, they’re extremely hard workers. We have created a community now, and especially out here I can’t speak for other counties, but at least in this county we have created a community where if the individual is willing to put in the work, the support is there for them.”

Fuery had a similar reflection, “so often, the people on probation are defined by the worst thing they did,” Fuery said. “And we try to help people see that they have good values. If you talk to people on probation, they do have good values, they care about their family, their friends, but their behavior’s not consistent with it.”

Wernet, living with 10 other people also recovering from substance abuse, began to represent Oxford House at meetings with other similar aid agencies. This is how he came into contact with Casa Grande Alliance. They told him to apply for a veterans position. He did with some initial reluctance and got the job. This is what he's been doing for the last year and a half.

On his son's last birthday, he reached out to Wernet. They began to rekindle their relationship. When he got married in June, Wernet was invited to the wedding.

"In one 24-hour period I got to make amends to my son, I got to talk to my daughter who I hadn't seen in eight years when she was in the military with her husband in Germany, I got introduced to my two granddaughters for the first time, and I was given forgiveness and respect for what I've done from my ex-wife," he said with glee.

Wernet has since lost everything he had in the house where he used to live with his family. He's now regained a photo that at one point he'd never imagined he'd ever have. A photo of the four of them: his ex-wife, his daughter, his son and himself.

Tags

Probation | Substance Abuse | Recovery | Shift In Probation | Drug Crime | Homelessness | Casa Grande Alliance | Oxford House | Arizona@work | Transitional Living Recovery Center | Pinal County Attorney's Office | Pinal County Probation Department | Crime | Probation And Parole Officer | Criminal Justice | Criminal Law | Recidivism | Social Issues | Maricopa, Arizona | Misconduct | Anti-social Behaviour | Justice | Criminology | Burglary | Issues In Ethics | Addiction

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