

'Everybody treats everyone here as normal people.' Clubhouses for mentally ill provide friendship, purpose

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Tre Jackson said he was amazed at what he found at the Oasis Clubhouse on his first visit.

"There were so many things you could do," he said, taking a break from working on a rap song in the small recording studio at the clubhouse. "I can go in the art room and draw, paint and sculpt. Go into the fitness room and work on my daily health."

Jackson, 22, also said the clubhouse has helped with his mental health, which is its core mission.

"I can say it's helped me become a better person mentally and emotionally," he said. "It helped me understand that no matter what situation I'll go through in life, I'll always come out of it."

Oasis is one of 10 clubhouses that contract with the Behavioral Health Services division of San Diego County's Health and Human Services Agency. Each offer a place for people with [mental health issues](#) to socialize, participate in activities, learn [job skills](#) and find a support system.

Piedad Garcia, deputy director of Behavioral Health Services, Adult & Older Adult System of Care, said she brought the clubhouse concept to San Diego after a visit to New York's Fountain House Clubhouse 20 years ago.

"We started in San Diego to address the need of people with mental illness so they could socialize, drop in, meet other people, focus on education goals, employment goals and recovery goals," she said, adding that keeping people out of psychiatric hospitals and helping them become self-sufficient also are goals.

Garcia said the country is striving to have all clubhouses follow an international model of best practices, which include a focus on peer-run activities. The Meeting Place, the county's first to open, is the only local clubhouse fully accredited by Clubhouse International, while six others

are certified and working toward accreditation.

Three of the the county's clubhouses focus on specific populations, including Oasis, which serves transitional age youth 16 to 26 years old and is run by Pathways Community Services on Market Street in the Stockton neighborhood east of downtown San Diego.

The Connections 2 Community Clubhouse in downtown San Diego is run by the National Alliance on Mental Illness and is exclusively for [homeless people](#), and the DCS Clubhouse in National City is run by Deaf Community Services of San Diego for people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

NAMI also runs the Casa del Centro Clubhouse in central San Diego and the Plaza clubhouse in South County, and Mental Health Systems runs the Escondido Clubhouse and the Mariposa Clubhouse in Oceanside.

The Union of Pan Asian Communities operates the East West Clubhouse in Kearny Mesa and Community Research Foundation operates the East Corner Clubhouse in El Cajon.

Mariposa Clubhouse

In Oceanside, several members talked about their experience at the Mariposa Clubhouse as life-changing, describing the facility in a county-owned building on Mission Avenue as a place where they can feel normal.

Dan Kaspernick has been a clubhouse member nine years and now is a peer support specialist.

"This is my wheelhouse," he said while helping prepare lunch in the clubhouse kitchen. "I feel like I'm making a difference with my peers."

Kasparnick, 56, had worked as a teacher and in warehouses and restaurants, but said his [bipolar disorder](#), post-traumatic stress disorder and [obsessive compulsive disorder](#) made holding the jobs difficult.

"The most important thing to me at that time was just fitting in," said Kasparnick, who runs a Christian-based support group and an "art of recovery" class that does watercolors, friendship bracelets and poetry.

"As a peer support specialist, I use my lived experience to help other people with their struggles," he said. "Mariposa is a great place to be for people like me. There's acceptance of people with brain disorders. A lot of times there aren't places for people to go. They feel isolated and afraid."

Michael Barritt said he has several disorders and used to stay at home alone before he discovered the clubhouse in 2019.

"There was no place for me to go," he said. "I felt crazy. I'm on medication and have severe anxiety. I didn't have anywhere to hang out or be with other people like me. I felt alone, and then I found this place and started coming every day, five times a week, and making friends."

Barritt started an improv group at the clubhouse, where he said he represents the LGBTQ community.

"I felt alone and bored at home," he said. "Here, I stay about five or six hours. I get to go to groups, I get to learn about myself, I get to meet people and go on outings. It really helped me as a person to like myself and care for myself better. I knew I had something to wake up for, and something to live for that day."

Mariposa Clubhouse program manager Kelly Villa said about 1,000 people are members of the clubhouse, which is open Monday-Friday.

The clubhouse organizes outings and events on Thursday, which included a trip to a concert in March, and members participate in community meetings with staffs to make decisions on what they will do each month.

Beth Ann Alex, 64, said she has made friends at the clubhouse and enjoys the field trips and events. She's on medication and has had psychotic episodes and been hospitalized, but said she feels at peace and stable at the clubhouse, where she's been a member since 2017.

"I'd be lost without this place," she said. "It feels good to be able to say that you're normal."

George Kobayashi—everybody knows him as Kobé—is 52 and bipolar. He has been coming to the clubhouse almost four years.

"I'm very prone to isolation," he said. "Coming here builds a little bit of hope. This place inspires. It's helped me break out of a shell of sometimes feeling really, really lonely."

Kobayashi said he feels like he has entered a new, positive chapter in his life since joining the clubhouse, where he feels an acceptance he didn't experience before.

"No matter what degree in their mental health stages they are, everybody treats everyone here as normal people," he said.

Jason Pache, 48, said he has schizoaffective disorder but has been stable since 2009. He has held jobs as a creative writing teacher and with the Boys & Girls Club and has a bachelor's degree in psychology from California State University San Marcos. He leads a literature program at the clubhouse.

"I love the solidarity here, the inclusivity," he said. "I feel like I can come here and just be myself. A lot of times, society will relegate me to the periphery, kind of banish me and forsake me. I feel like it's wonderful here, that I can be accepted and don't have to confirm to the norms of society, and be celebrated here for my own uniqueness."

Mary Elizabeth Lopez, 54, has been a member since 2010 and said she has several [mental health](#) issues and had been hospitalized.

"I'm like a mini success story," she said. "I've come a long way from when I first started coming here. I didn't have goals. I wasn't looking for work. Now I have goals. I just have a new outlook on life, more positive than negative. And it's all because of this place."

Sisters Pauline Diaz, 35, and Monica Gutierrez, 28, have been coming to the clubhouse for about a year and also said it's had a positive impact on their lives.

"I was in a dark place in my life because of depression," said Diaz, who recently earned a food-handlers card after taking a class at the clubhouse. "I just didn't want to be around people. I just wanted to be home. I gave it (the clubhouse) a try, and I feel like it helped me come out of my comfort zone. I'm more social."

Gutierrez said she has post [traumatic stress disorder](#) and was encouraged to go to the clubhouse by her sister.

"I wouldn't leave home," she said. "I didn't want to get out of bed all day. Coming here made me more social. Before, I wouldn't be able to go to people and have conversations with them."

A place for youths

At the Oasis Clubhouse, unemployment specialist Eddie Padilla said he helps members find jobs through a partnership with Back2Work.

"I look for jobs based on their needs and what they want," he said. "If they don't have transportation, I'll drive them to their jobs. I help with interview skills and I check up on them to see how they're doing in their work."

Padilla helped find a job with California Department of Transportation for Colby Harmon, 21, who has been coming to the clubhouse for a month.

"They have great opportunities here," Harmon said. "You just have to take advantage of them. You can't just sit and wait for opportunities."

Harmon said he has PTSD, depression and outburst rage disorder, and he appreciates the calmness he finds at the clubhouse. Homeless, he spends his nights at the shelter Father Joe's Villages operates at Golden Hall, where he said the environment can be chaotic. Sometimes he naps at the clubhouse to catch up on sleep.

The clubhouse has a workout room that doubles as a game room with table tennis, foosball and surfboards that members can take on outings to a beach. Another room has couches and TVs for watching movies, and clients can have their hair cuts in another room twice a week. Mary Ellen Baracerros, regional director of San Diego County Pathways, said the clubhouse had about 450 members last year.

Aljandra Byrd, 21, said she likes to do artwork at the clubhouse.

"It's a way to distract myself from thinking of my anxiety and impulsivity and depression," she said. "If I'm with other people and expressing myself, that helps me to control myself."

Francisco Campana has been coming to the clubhouse for seven years, and at 25 years old he is about to age out of the program.

"I was really isolated," he recalled about how he felt at 17, when he joined the clubhouse. "I was very anti-social and kept to myself. At the first week, I'm not going to lie, I did force myself to come. But this place is really comfortable. I started opening up. With baby steps, I started being more social."

Campana said he especially liked trips to Rady's Children's Hospital, where he and others would volunteer at the Ronald McDonald House. Today he works in a rehab facility near the clubhouse, and sometimes refers his younger patients to Oasis.

While he won't be able to continue as a member after his next birthday, Campana said he hopes to remain connected to the clubhouse in some way.

"Seven years ago, I was very quiet and not open to anyone," he said. "Now, I'm social. I love to volunteer. They really helped me when I was down. To be honest, I owe this place my life. I don't know where I'd be if they weren't here."

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