



TARA ENGBERG

**POSITIVE CHANGE** Leroy (L) gets support from Robert at group session at Queens Hospital Center.

## Program helping seniors battle substance abuse

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Behind the door of Building T at the Queens Hospital Center in Jamaica, a group of people — once strangers, but now friends — sat together as they talked about their lifelong battles with drugs and alcohol.

Charles, who walks with a cane, crashed his car into a pole after he blacked out while driving drunk. Rescuers used the Jaws of Life to cut him from his mangled car.

Doris almost burned down her apartment after she put something on the stove and passed out. The next thing she knew, firefighters were banging on her door.

Frank has been arrested 30 times for driving while intoxicated — the first time in 1974 and most recently in December.

These are not reckless youths. They are senior citizens. Many are parents and grandparents. Veterans of World War II and Vietnam. Government and city workers. Secretaries. Homemakers.

Some have been in and out of detox and rehab programs. Others have served time. Because of their addictions, many have lost jobs, ties with family and friends. Some even have been close to losing their lives.

It's Never Too Late is the name of a program at Queens Hospital Center that teaches older adults how to live their lives without alcohol and drugs. Over six months, participants meet with a counselor three times a week in a group setting.

### 'A different set of issues'

The program, which began in 1999, received a grant of \$83,000 a year later from the city Office of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Alcoholism Services, has treated more than 125 older adults. The oldest graduate is 81.

Richard Koffler, coordinating manager of the program and the group's counselor, said the reasons for chemical dependency differ for the young and old.

"This group has a different set of issues. They may have lost a spouse, friends, mobility or pur-

pose in life, especially after retirement," said Koffler. "They don't feel comfortable in group treatment sessions with younger patients because they could be either their children or their grandchildren. They come from a different era."

George, 74, who grew up during the 1930s and remembers when his grandmother made bathtub gin during Prohibition, has been drinking for more than 60 years. One of his fondest memories is when he was a fire control man in the Navy and he and his buddies drained the fuel from the torpedoes and drank it. "It was 180-proof alcohol, better than any alcohol they ever made," he said.

### Years of denial

Doris, 59 — who used to drink a quart of vodka a day and lost her job, apartment and car as a result — had her last drink May 7. She entered the program three days later.

"I denied being an alcoholic for many years. I said, 'I can do this by myself.' The more I said this, the more I drank," said Doris.

"I remember I would buy alcohol rather than pay the Con Ed bill, and then the lights would go out."

Robert, 55, graduated from law school and, rather than practice, snorted cocaine every day for 20 years, he said.

He once had cash in the bank, a house in the Hamptons, a penthouse apartment in Manhattan and women at his feet.

In December 1999, he lost it all after he was busted by the feds for selling 2,000 pounds of marijuana.

"The longer I was addicted, the worse my decision-making became. It affected everything — my family and personal relationships with girls. Nothing ever won over the coke," said Robert, whose case is pending in federal court.

"The people in the program are all similar in age, so you have a certain comfort level.

"We feel that we have all been through a lot of life's experiences and are here to support one another."

For information about It's Never Too Late, call (718) 683-2750.