

Three men recovering from addiction share how Topeka's Oxford House is helping them on their journey

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Toby Brouhard and Adrian Smur chat about their experience in the Oxford House. Smur's graduation cap and gown from Washburn Tech can be seen next to him on the recliner. *Alexander Edwards/Topeka Capital-Journal*

Toby Brouhard has dealt with addiction for 31 years.

In those three decades, he has gone in and out of 12 or 13 different inpatient and outpatient facilities that specialize in treating addiction.

Nothing worked.

Year after year, Brouhard sought ways to kick his addiction and move forward with his life. Nothing seemed to be the right fit or give him the right resources he needed to succeed in his fight.

In October 2020, he was arrested on federal charges and incarcerated for 10 months. His family was able to raise the bail money, and he was released "by the grace of God."

But he kept relapsing.

Finding himself at Topeka's Mirror inpatient treatment in 2021, Brouhard saw a presentation about Oxford Housing. He decided to apply. He was accepted at two homes, ultimately choosing Enlightenment House, where he has been since early December.

Now, Brouhard holds a job, something he said he hasn't been able to do for 20 years. He said he feels like his mental health is stable. He is attending his appointments and taking medication.

"I'm just really starting to have a productive life," he said, "and really starting to live it."



The Enlightenment Oxford House is located in a quiet neighborhood in central Topeka. Inside, men are helping each other maintain their sobriety. *Alexander Edwards/Topeka Capital-Journal*

Welcome to the Enlightenment House

The properties on the S.W. Clay Street look like any other home. Green lawns have to be mowed, cars come and go as residents go to work, school or elsewhere.

One of the houses is unique — not on the outside but the inside.

Located at 900 S.W. Clay St., the Enlightenment Oxford House is a haven for those recovering from addiction. The house is one of 25 in the Topeka area — six have opened in the past 16 months — and is part of a national nonprofit that began in 1975. There are over 150 such houses across Kansas.

Each house is democratically run with between six and 15 members who forge brother and sisterhoods with one another during their stays. Topeka's Enlightenment House is home to eight residents — each pay an equal share of rent and household expenses — and has a position that assist with their re-entry.

At Enlightenment, three members sat down to share their stories with The Capital-Journal. Each has struggled with addiction in the past, and each has generally positive outlooks on what the future may bring.

Adrian Smur has been a member of the Enlightenment House since it opened in July of last year. Brouhard called Smur a "good model of Oxford and recovery." Smur has attended house meetings, goes to work and seeks treatments as needed.



Adrian Smur talks with Toby Brouhard. Smur was a senior member of the Enlightenment Oxford House and has lived there since it opened in July 2021. Smur is moving this week. *Alexander Edwards/Topeka Capital-Journal*

Smur moves onward and upward

And that work has paid off: Smur recently graduated from Washburn Tech with a degree in welding. He will be leaving the Oxford house on Tuesday as he moves out of state.

“My experience has been, I guess you could say liberating,” Smur said. “I’ve learned how to be accountable and how to handle situations that I never would have been able to handle in the past.”

While leaving the Enlightenment house may be a bittersweet moment for Smur, he said the experience is one he won't forget.

And the national network of Oxford Houses means if he finds himself in a place where he needs help, he can find it without fear of being turned away.

“Definitely an experience that’s going to stick with me for the rest of my life,” he said. “I know there’s Oxford Houses all over the country, so if I reach a position where I need to go to Oxford, I won’t be as standoffish at the idea as I first was.”

Brouhard's position is enlightening

After being released from federal custody, Brouhard explored the option of Oxford housing, but worried his case prevented him from applying.

“I didn’t think I was eligible because I was a federal case,” he said. “But there was a conversation with some of the guys that came in to do the presentation, and they clarified it for me. So when I was released a week later, I decided to apply for Oxford.

He's now president of the Enlightenment House. He was elected by members, and said it seemed like the logical next step to help him continue growing.

Though Brouhard “hates to be cliché,” he said he’s finds the leadership position enlightening, despite some of the ups and downs. Because of the democratic nature of Oxford Houses, Brouhard has never felt alone in his position.

This was not the first experience Brouhard has had with an Oxford House. He tried it for the first time in the late 1990s.

“It was a whole different situation,” he said. “I was younger, so I wasn’t really ready for that experience I guess.”

Brouhard said he stayed for a day and left.

After his most recent experience — winding up in federal custody, making bail and relapsing — he decided to try an Oxford House again.

“Since being in Oxford, the craving and the desire (to use) has left me,” Brouhard said. “They get you to meetings. They make sure you have support and you have people to lean on. It’s a wonderful experience.”



Josh Redman watches television at the Enlightenment Oxford House. Redman and Toby Brouhard are roommates and have forged a brotherhood with their shared experiences. *Alexander Edwards/Topeka Capital-Journal*

Accountability is a two-way street

Brouhard shares a room with Josh Redman. The two have a bond because of their shared experiences. Redman said if either were in a position where they end up “back out there,” it would devastate them.

“We’re not brothers just because we’re in a house in Oxford. We’re family,” Redman said.

Redman said the house has lost good people even in the short time they have been in the house together.

Redman said he is afraid of what the changes, even positive, may mean. Not so much because he doesn’t want to better his life, he said, but because he is “scared of success.”

“Back in the drug world, I was successful but it wasn’t for the right reasons,” he said. “I’m 33, and I’m still scared shitless because my issue is I’m afraid of success.”

Redman, who is completing his high school education online, said he works with his housemates to stay accountable. He said they will call him out if they notice he is starting down the wrong path.

Redman called the feeling of brotherhood “unexplainable.” Although his mother and sister have been in his life, Redman said the support — and sometimes challenge — he has at the Enlightenment house is encouraging.

“It’s scary on both ends because if I slip and they get tired of it, I’m (expletive),” he said. “But if I continue the motivation and just have my little slips, but listen to their input and show growth, I’m going to succeed in everything I do.”



Toby Brouhard sits in the audience of the Nehemiah Action Event on May 9. *Alexander Edwards/Topeka Capital-Journal*

Valeo Health commits to expansion

According to the Recovery Research Institute, a nonprofit research institute based out of Massachusetts General Hospital, 20 million U.S. adults struggle with some form of substance addiction.

Of those, the Recovery Research Institute reports one in 10 Americans have resolved “a significant substance use problem.” This wasn’t lost on Topeka JUMP, who at its annual Nehemiah Action Event, called on Valeo Health to implement an expansion of its crisis stabilization center.

Valeo leadership made that commitment, as well as adding more crisis intervention beds and working with Topeka JUMP on starting the work.

“All too often, individuals with severe mental health problems would show up at the jail with law enforcement not necessarily because they committed a crime, but because the jail was the only place that could safely

house that individual,” said Dick Kline, a member of the Valeo board and former Shawnee County corrections director, said at the May 9 Nehemiah.

Addictions are classified as a mental illness according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse. Oxford Houses like Enlightenment can stand to provide a cost-effective service that can help up to 81.5% of participants get sober and stay sober for the following year.



Toby Brouhard explains some of the tough conversations he has had while living with Josh Redman and Adrian Smur. The men hold each other accountable for their recoveries. *Alexander Edwards/Topeka Capital-Journal*

Enlightenment House has openings

The Enlightenment house is losing two members, including Smur. Those interested in finding a drug- and alcohol-free home — and are on their journey of recovery — are encouraged to apply.

Listings can be found at oxfordvacancies.com, and applicants are encouraged to go to house meetings in person. Redman said that helps members get an idea of how the applicant may fit in with their community.

“You can’t lie to another addict,” he said. “I’ve learned how to read people, and I’ve discussed it in our meetings on some people that they’re not ready.”

Every applicant has to be voted on by members, with at least 81% voting in favor of admittance.

Redman said he hopes applicants are inspired by seeing the path Enlightenment House members are on.

Redman said kicking someone out or seeing them relapse is “heartbreaking.”

Brouhard said the path to recovery is one that takes different paces. He said as long as one is willing to work on one's self, there’s going to be a place open at Oxford.

“If you’re not doing anything, then the door is right there,” he said. “This house has to run in a way that we open space up for people that are willing to do the work for themselves.”

Learning to open up to others

Brouhard said it can be frustrating at times, especially when he isn't in the mood to hear what others have to say.

“When I think I’m doing the best I can and they’re saying, 'You can do better,' it’s like I know I can, but I didn’t really want to,” he said. “But I’m determined to stay clean and sober.”

Brouhard said he’s learned how to open up with his housemates, if not always with words but with emotion

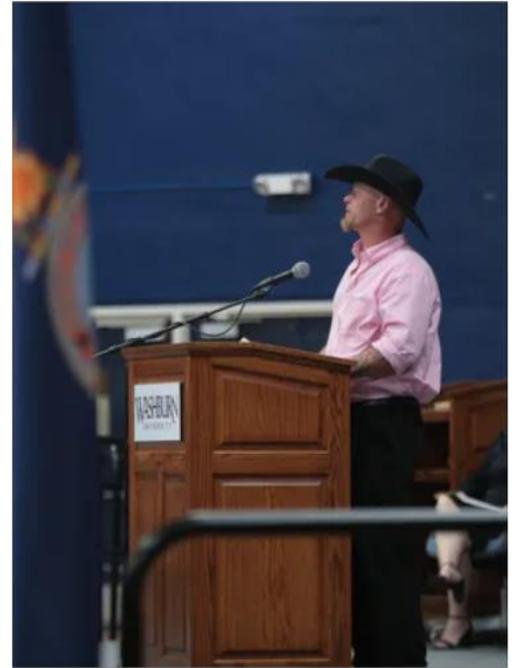
At times, he’s said they can see his emotions, especially if he is going through something. The nature of the Oxford House, however, means Brouhard has been able to get comfortable in sharing.

“There’s been this comfort knowing that it’s not going to be used against me later,” he said.

Brouhard, who recently married, is optimistic about the future.

“There is a lot of local community, including addicts, out there changing the world right now,” he said. “And it all stems from going into meetings, getting a sponsor and working the 12-step program. And you can change your life that way.”

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Toby Brouhard speaks at the Topeka JUMP Nehemiah action event at Washburn University on May 9. Brouhard spoke about his experience recovering in an Oxford House in Topeka. *Alexander Edwards/Topeka Capital-Journal*