

San Jose addiction counselor's family struggles inspired her work



by [Lorraine Gabbert](#) November 19, 2024



Mary Crocker Cook's alcohol and drug studies program at San Jose City College starts students on a career path in the field of addiction treatment. Photo by Lorraine Gabbert.

Mary Crocker Cook turned her addiction into empowering others, bringing dignity and purpose to people who've experienced alcohol or drug addiction.

As the daughter of a military father, Crocker Cook's family moved frequently. Stability was hard to come by and disruption was constant. It was tough for the family, including her mother, who turned to alcohol to help her cope. When Crocker Cook saw her behavior starting to mirror her mother's, she stopped drinking in her late twenties.

"I went to recovery to help her, and wound up staying to help me," she told San José Spotlight.

Crocker Cook's personal experience led her to a career in addiction counseling and to developing an alcohol and drug studies program in 1990 in the field of addiction treatment. Her groundbreaking work is still taught today at San Jose City College. The students apply their lived-experiences toward a career path in substance use programs. The majority of addiction counselors in Santa Clara County attended her program, she said, with thousands becoming certified counselors in recovery, changing lives.

"We have made a solid imprint on the professionalism of the services delivered here," she said, "and have even had a chance to train family members, so it has a generational impact."

Gary Montrezza, CEO of Pathway Society, which provides substance use counseling services, appreciates Crocker Cook's expansive breadth of knowledge, innovative approach to treatment and perseverance.

"You have to really love people and the idea of their potential," he told San José Spotlight. "She has the patience, determination and skills to bring that forth. She's extremely passionate and has all the technical educational chops to back it up. She's on a mission."



Santa Clara County Supervisor Cindy Chavez describes Crocker Cook, 60, as a joyful warrior. She considers Crocker Cook's work essential due to the high percentage of people battling addiction countywide.

"One of the challenges when you have an addiction, is you start to give up on yourself. So many other people do, too," Chavez told San José Spotlight. "(Crocker Cook) reinforces over and over again the value of every person ... that we shouldn't give up on each other."

As part of Crocker Cook's alcohol and drug studies program, students are mentored and placed in yearlong internships with agencies like Pathway Society. In addition, Crocker Cook annually awards students \$1,000 scholarships. This year, David Espino and Brian Adrong were recipients.

After 16 years in prison, Espino turned his life around. His certification and degree from the alcohol and drug studies program, in addition to his life experiences, led him to working with the Santa Clara County Behavioral Health Navigator Program, a call center connecting people with mental health specialists. Espino is pursuing a degree at Grand Canyon University to become a substance use disorder rehabilitation counselor.

"Being able to enter into the (alcohol and drug studies) program and complete it has given me an opportunity to give back to the community," Espino told San José Spotlight. "Mary Cook's program opens that door for people like me, people that are incarcerated or have a (criminal) justice involved background. As a society and community, we need people like Mary Cook to help people help other people."

Today, Crocker Cook is program coordinator for the alcohol and drug studies program, and continues to run her private practice, Connections Counseling Associates. She is a commissioner on the behavioral health board of Santa Clara County.

In addition to receiving a bachelor's degree in psychology from California Baptist University and a master's degree in clinical/counseling psychology from San Jose State University, she earned a Ph.D. in clinical psychology and addiction studies from Selinus University, Italy and a doctorate in ministry from California Christian University, Berkeley.

Crocker Cook started her private practice and began teaching at San Jose City College at age 24.

"I was embedded in people who were recovering very young," she said. "That has never left me in terms of hopefulness."

Her first paid position in addiction treatment was at El Camino Health, where she fell in love with it. Afterward, she became a clinical director at various treatment sites, started treatment centers and consulted. She is deeply immersed in program development for addiction, teaching and running her private practice. But she is proudest of the addiction studies program she created at San Jose City College.

"I can see what we're doing works," she told San José Spotlight. "The combination of lived experience and education is powerful. The fact that their butts are in a chair is a testament to them and their capacity. My job is to help them figure out what they want to do with that."

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