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12 steps from Hollywood to home

'Nico' Fitzgerald left films to work at recovery center

BY LYNN MELLIS WORTHINGTON Republican-American

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KENT — Nicholas "Nico" Fitzgerald's strong desire to lead a fulfilling life has led him from Hollywood movie sets back to the area where he grew up and graduated from high school.

Fitzgerald became program director for High Watch Recovery Center in December, but he is no stranger to the facility or Kent.

He said he battled his own addictions and was a guest at High Watch several years ago. That experience changed him and he decided he wanted to alter his life.

"I came back to be closer to my family, to get out of L.A. and be closer to High Watch," he said. "I was ready to transition out of the film business."

High Watch was founded in 1940 by several people, including Bill Wilson, one of the founders of Alcoholics Anonymous. It was the first drug and alcohol treatment facility based on the principles of the 12 steps. The treatment is combined with evidenced-based scientific research and a state-of-the-art medical facility.

"I wanted to be back to my roots and be close to my family," Fitzgerald said. "I was taking a look back on my life, and as much fun and as great a time I had making movies and films, I didn't feel I was living a life of any sort of purpose."

FITZGERALD GREW UP in nearby Washington, Conn., and graduated from Kent School in 1988. A member of the school's successful crew program, he was offered a rowing scholarship at UCLA, which led him to California and into an occupation in the film industry. He graduated from UCLA with a bachelor's degree in political science. He spent 13 years working in films and commercials, eventually rising to an assistant director, a position that put him in the "nerve center" on production sets, he said.

He lists many films and commercials on his resume, ranging from the "Sons of Anarchy" TV series to the movie "Imagine That," starring Eddie Murphy, to Nike commercials. He also was a production assistant on the original "The Fast and the Furious" movie, starring Vin Diesel, in 2001.

There are similar skill sets involved in managing a film set, and guiding staff and residents in recovery, he said. Thinking on one's feet, handling a lot of logistics and strong people skills are all involved, he noted.

"An assistant director tries to make it as easy as possible for the director to show up on set and say action. We implement everything that needs to happen so the director can come in and focus on the actual shooting," Fitzgerald said.



Nicholas Fitzgerald is the program director at High Watch Recovery Center in Kent. He was formerly a guest at the facility and a former assistant film director in Hollywood. Lynn Mellis Worthington Republican-American

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AS HIGH WATCH'S PROGRAM DIRECTOR, Fitzgerald directs a staff of 22 and is responsible for implementing and overseeing the 12 Step Program, which includes morning reflections; living sober; chapel; Alcoholics Anonymous Big Book seminars; and inside and outside AA meetings. He also manages extracurricular activities such as yoga, guided meditation, nature walks, art therapy and working out at the fitness center. Fitzgerald also serves as a liaison between guests of High Watch and the clinical and nursing staffs.

He recalled enduring 14-hour days of filming and commuting 20 miles on a freeway that took almost 2 hours each way.

"It was fun to see your name up on the big screen, but looking back, I wanted to feel I had made more of a contribution in my time here on Earth," he said.

He started working part-time at High Watch as part of the "milieu" staff. He did everything from leading nature hikes to driving the facility van to take people to church.

FITZGERALD IS A BELIEVER IN THE AA 12-STEP program that stresses personal growth and dependence on a higher spiritual being. He has helped implement a 12 Step coaching program in which guests meet twice a week for one-on-ones with a coach.

High Watch CEO Janina J. Kean said the facility treats addiction as a biological, psychological and spiritual disease, so guests are given an interdisciplinary treatment. It is important to have people on staff who have an understanding of the spiritual component, she said, calling them "12-steppers." Fitzgerald is one of those.

"He's very natural at it," she said. "It is amazing to watch and see the kind of contribution he makes as a 12-stepper."

When he interviewed for the position, she said his film director skills were attractive.

"He knows how to manage," Kean said. "If he can manage a movie, he can manage sick and suffering alcoholics."

Fitzgerald said he likes the opportunity to give back to both the program that assisted him and the current guests at High Watch. Now a resident of Northfield, Fitzgerald's twin sister and mother also live in Litchfield. He's also enjoying being close to a large extended family scattered around northwest Connecticut, he said.

"We're doing some really neat things here," Fitzgerald said of High Watch. "You get that sense of serenity and giving back. It is a challenging job, but I'm still amazed that every day I look up, it's 6 o'clock and the day has just flown by."

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