

COMMUNITY

Strong Solutions' namesake has mission to help

KODIAK TAPESTRY



Mike Rostad

Even at the tender age of 10, Jonathan Strong wanted to help the needy.

While attending a kids' club, he got an award for helping someone with a disability. His act of kindness was documented in a local newspaper article.

"I have had this desire to help," Strong said during a presentation to local Rotarians.

That desire has been channeled into several humanitarian projects within an organization known as Strong Solutions, which was founded by Strong and his wife, Ally. The purpose of this Kodiak agency is to assist those who fall within the categories of the elderly, special needs and developmental and intellectual disabilities, as well as substance abuse and addiction.

Assistance comes by way of housing, counseling and other services.

"Strong Solutions' focus and passion is to help people with special needs, like autism, Down syndrome, and other intellectual, development disabilities, and elders and seniors with long-term care needs to reach their goals," said Strong.

"Strong Solutions is an integral part of maintaining health care services in the state of Alaska, especially in Kodiak, because of the costs associated with long-term care services," Strong said, pointing out that his agency provides care at a cost less than local care facilities.

In his presentation, Strong addressed the Age Wave and Silver Tsunami, which refer

to "a lot of baby boomers... retiring and needing more support."

Strong also called attention to autism cases that are rising, he said.

"As of 2023, one in 36 children in the United States have autism. People with autism may need long-term care services as well."

Strong noted that special education is a "huge investment" in the Kodiak Island Borough School District, but once special education students reach age 22 they age out of the program. Some of these students are in low income and one-parent households, Strong said.

"When they age out, they fall through the cracks. We help fill that gap," Strong said. "People with special needs have been lectured and taught at their whole lives. Even as adults they're treated as children by their parents, or guardians or other providers — even the community. But they desire to be treated as adults."

"We listen to them. We focus on them — their goals and their dreams, their aspirations. Then we try to develop the solution, come alongside them and reach their goals together. It's my passion, and it's a very rewarding mission to do this," said Strong.

Strong Solutions was established as an addiction, counseling and case management service, "educating individuals and families and groups. I did workshops in the community," said Strong.

The agency has branched into transitional housing as well. The seeds of Strong Solutions were planted in the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, said Strong.

"I was in California at the time, watching the news, seeing these people that didn't have clean drinking water, food to eat, stranded on the rooftops, needing a helicopter to rescue them; stranded on a freeway overpass. At that time I wanted to help them, so I volunteered with the American Red Cross (which sent me to Texas and Louisiana.

Through that process, I was hired as the lead substance abuse



MIKE ROSTAD/PHOTO

Jonathan Strong speaks to the noon Rotary Club.

"It was a great time in my life, because for the first time I felt the joy of selflessness. I was focused on others and their needs rather than my own," said Strong.

"My calling and mission were to help and serve other people," said Strong, who went back to college, attending University of the Pacific in California to earn a degree in addiction counseling.

"I had some background with recovery. I have been in (substance abuse) recovery since Jan. 29th of 2004."

While going to school, Strong began working with The Salvation Army in an 80-bed recovery residential alcohol program for men. At first he did "grunt work," such as picking up donations, throwing them into a truck and off-loading them at The Salvation Army headquarters.

"It was great," Strong said.

When he completed his course work at the university, he did his internship in a Salvation Army residential treatment program.

"Through that process, I was hired as the lead substance abuse

counselor. It was a great job. I helped other drug/alcohol counseling interns, teaching them about counseling," Strong said.

He developed a study method that "helped hundreds of other addiction counselors pass their state certification exams," said Strong. "I had several roles with (The Salvation Army in California," said Strong.

He was the case manager and program manager for youth and adult programs; he helped families with their long-term recovery goals and worked in the homeless shelter.

"I helped men that were basically coming off the streets, getting them into our pre-program where we taught them work skills and recovery skills and then would take them to six months or a year or longer residential programs. They would come back to our program and do transitional housing.

"We even had a culinary arts training program at this transitional center," said Strong.

Strong's experiences in California caught the

attention of personnel at the Kodiak Salvation Army, which had built transitional housing near its complex.

"I came here to manage the transitional housing program" 10 years ago, said Strong.

Strong also worked as a drug and alcohol counselor at the Providence Kodiak Island Counseling Center and was employed at Senior Citizens of Kodiak as Medicaid case management care coordinator and became director of the Island Cove Adult Day Program for elders and people with disabilities.

He worked with Pat Branson, the senior center's CEO at the time, and administered the transit system, otherwise known as KATS. Strong was a founding member of Kodiak Area Mentor Program, which is a faith-based program that helps people in the criminal justice system get back on their feet.

In 2015 Strong Solutions started a transitional housing program for women and women with children. It was located in the Strong's little house.

The first woman who moved in had been living at the Jackson trailer court.

She was addicted to drugs; her boyfriend was one of top drug dealers in Kodiak, said Strong. She and her son had been squatting in a trailer with no electricity or running water. Eventually they moved to the mainland where they are doing well, said Strong.

Another client came to live at the transitional housing in 2019.

"She was really struggling," said Strong. "Not only did she have an intellectual and developmental disability, but she had a lot of mental health issues, such as schizophrenia," said Strong. She was addicted to heroin and methamphetamine and was being trafficked. "She was being manipulated and taken advantage of — a very difficult situation. We moved her into our group home. It was challenging because she wasn't sober; she was still using drugs," said Strong. "We helped her to get sober."

She moved back to her community and is

now involved with her family, doing well, said Strong.

"You take an individual like that, with all of the mental health and behavioral health issues, and she could be in an institution somewhere at \$30,000 a month," said Strong.

Strong Solutions' transitional housing obtained a dual license "so we can support people with intellectual and developmental disabilities or elders with physical disabilities," said Strong.

He and his wife are live-in caregivers. They now have two homes.

"We're kind of a 'mom-and-pop' organization. Now we have a staff of seven, so we've been growing quite a bit," said Strong.

He noted that his organization is structured differently than large agencies that do the same kind of work.

In their organizational charts, "you have the CEO" at the top. "Then you have the executive team; then... the managers and directors. Then you have the staff — the employees.

"We flip (that organizational structure) upside down. Our clients — the people we serve — are at the top. Our support professionals that are helping those individuals are underneath them. Then we have our managers. I'm at the bottom as an administrator. My job is to support everybody," said Strong.

Strong works with a therapeutic community, and "therapeutic is about relationships," he said. "It's about building trust. They (the clients) don't care what I know about them; I care about them," said Strong.

Therapy is more than saying, "I'm here to help you," said Strong. "It's an action. That's what we do." That action includes helping clients reach their goals and aspirations.

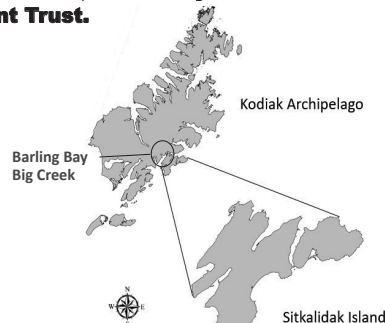
"We're their friends, we're their guides, their mentors, counselors," said Strong. "I can give somebody all these rules. But rules without relationship equals rebellion.

"So it's building that relationship. Foundational trust is what we do."

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