

This club's '1 for the road' is strictly java

By Richard Lech
staff writer

The Northwest Alano Club in Westland is a watering hole for alcoholics.

But the traditional booze found in so-called watering holes can't be found on the premises.

Instead members and visitors drink water, pop, tea and hundreds of pounds of the club's most popular drink — coffee.

They mingle with others, play pool and cards, watch TV and gab as late as 2 a.m. when the club closes for the night.

The club is an ideal spot for recovering alcoholics who are attempting to stay away from "wet places" in their fight to overcome alcoholism.

"This is a place to socialize without the influence of alcohol," said club member Bill K. of Westland.

THE CLUB has 640 dues-paying members throughout the metropolitan area — from Birmingham and Bloomfield Hills to Howell to Flat Rock to Ontario. Dues are \$6 a month or \$50 a year.

Vice chairman Eddie G. said the club is the place for people who have gone through a rehabilitation program and need a place in which to visit and talk to others while they stay away from alcohol.

"Here there's always someone to come and talk to — someone who knows what kind of problems alcoholics have to go through," Eddie said.

Most club members belong to Alcoholics Anonymous and attend AA meetings at the club and at other meeting places. Members use only their first name and the first initial of their last names within the club's confines.

Next month, the club will mark its 14th anniversary and its first anniversary in its present location, a former elementary school building on Farmington Road between Joy and Ann Arbor Trail.

During the year, members have made the facility a unique gathering place. There are other Alano clubs in the Detroit area, but none has a facility that is as large or as extensive, club members said.

"IT'S PROBABLY as nice a facility of its kind in the U.S.," said Bob L. of Dearborn, a former member of the club's board of directors.

The club leases the building from the Livonia School District, which uses part of the building during the day for the district's curriculum department.

Taking up the remaining 28,000 square feet of the building, the club offers a coffee shop and social area, pool and card tables, large and small meeting rooms, several shelves of books and pamphlets on alcoholism and even a gym for athletic activities.

Club members were responsible for all of the renovation work. They raised money to pay outside contractors to perform some of the larger work, such as knocking out the walls of four classrooms to create the club's major meeting room.

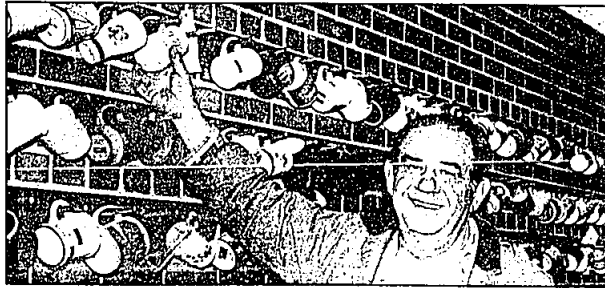
Club members and friends, though, did the rest of the work, including painting, paneling, woodwork, electrical work and ceilings. They plan to install air conditioning.

"ALL THE WORK that's been done by volunteers, if I went to duplicate it, it would probably cost \$150,000," Eddie G. said.

The club, which is entirely self-supporting, serves as a central site for various programs. Closed AA meetings are held there every day. Alano, a group for spouses of alcoholics, meets three times a week and a group for adult children of alcoholics meets there once a week.

Many of the club's functions, though, are open to the general public.

The club has open AA meetings at 8:30 p.m. every Sunday, a fish fry followed by films on alcoholism every Friday night, monthly dances and even a bingo at 11 a.m. every Thursday.



Eddy G., vice chairman of the Northwest Alano Club, reaches for his mug from a wall of coffee mugs. The mugs belong to club members, almost all of whom are re-

covering alcoholics. Members use the coffee mugs as mailboxes for leaving and receiving messages from other members.

The club's doors are open from 10 a.m. to 2 a.m. Monday through Saturday, and from 10 a.m. to midnight Sunday to accommodate people who just want to stop by.

THE CLUB is not directly affiliated or sanctioned by AA but without AA the club would not exist, said club member Art.

"There's no way a non-drinking facility can survive without AA members," Art said. "It's been tried before, with teen clubs and what have you, and it hasn't worked."

One of the first things a visitor notices upon entering the Northwest Alano Club is the row of coffee mugs hanging on the wall for the lots of coffee consumed by members during the year. The cups do double duty, also serving as mailboxes through which members keep in touch with each other.

"We'd like to buy the place when we can afford it," Eddie G. said. "We'd also like to put in a sauna bath and swimming pool so people can put their bodies back in shape."

The club already has put the "healthy body means a healthy mind" philosophy into practice with its weekly volleyball league. The league has grown to six teams, which play at 1 p.m. every Sunday.

Eddy G. said he puts in 12 to 14 hours at the center each week. He has been "dry" for 16 years and has been an AA speaker for the last 12 of those years.

Although he has a bachelor's degree in aeronautics and a master's degree in electrical engineering, Eddy G. found his education was no protection against alcoholism.

"SOMETIMES intellectual pride prevents a person from being honest with himself," Eddy G. said. "One of the biggest stumbling blocks to anyone is false pride."

Although AA stresses spiritual matters as part of its program for recovering alcoholics, the group is not an outright religious organization.

"We're not interested in saving anybody's soul," Eddy G. said. "We leave that up to the religious organizations. All we want to do is wring them out a little bit, one day at a time."

In the end, survival is what AA is all about and the Alano Club plays a very important, supportive role in the process, club members said.

"It's like the speaker at the Toronto (AA) convention said," Bob L. said. "It's not hard to become an old-timer. All you have to do is not drink and not die."

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