

Addiction: Buying the Cure at Passages Malibu

At upscale "rehab," all you need is faith. And \$67,000 a month

By Mark Groubert

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Perched on a bluff above

Pacific Coast Highway, *Passages Malibu Addiction Cure Center* looks more like a prefab movie set than a place to kick hard drugs. Near the entrance of the garish \$23 million mansion stands a glass-enclosed gym filled with the latest high-tech equipment, on which men and women work out feverishly with the assistance of hands-on trainers. Beside a well-stocked koi pond, two stone-carved lions with gargoyle-like faces guard the marble walkway to the imposing front door, which is framed by a Parthenon-style stone portico and supported by eight 20-foot-high Ionic columns. Marble is everywhere.

Inside the cavernous main hall — there are two other buildings on the 10-acre facility — are yet more columns, a cascading staircase and a gaggle of pretty young guys and gals. These are the personal assistants. Each client at *Passages* gets his or her own personal assistant, which is kinda cool when you've been hammer-heading (combining Ecstasy and Viagra) for months and need a Himalayan goji-berry cocktail brought quickly to your bedside so you don't miss the next installment of *Intervention* on your personal 46-inch plasma TV while waiting for your kick meds to kick in. The 29 comfortable beds here are currently filled with patients who pay \$67,550 a month for them. *Passages*, owned and run by Chris Prentiss and his son Pax, is the most expensive, luxurious and controversial residential drug-treatment center in the world.

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The Prentisses are the Holocaust deniers of the addiction-recovery industry. They deny the existence of addiction. They deny the existence of alcoholism. They deny that it is a disease, or that it is incurable.

In April 2007, Chris and Pax Prentiss appeared on a segment for *Paula Zahn Now*, in an interview with CNN's Brooke Anderson.

"The Prentiss duo," Anderson explained, "claim a success rate of better than 80 percent and even wrote a book about their unconventional approach. They reject the decades-old 12-step program and proudly defy scientific studies about addiction. Doctors, scientists say addiction is a disease. You say it's not."

"I know it's not," Pax stated bluntly.



“When you send patients home, what do you say to them?” Anderson asked.

Young and old Prentiss almost in unison: “You’re cured. Totally.”

“You will never use drugs and alcohol again,” Pax added. “Your dependency has been cured. Have a wonderful life.”

Chris Prentiss’ personal assistant, Deena Avery, a woman in her late 40s with a Hale-Bopp glint in her eyes, leads me on a mini-tour. She indicates the “graduation room” to our right and tells me about the Native American talking-stick ceremony that graduates take part in. I’m given a glass of fresh carrot juice, which I sip nervously while watching six kitchen workers busily prepare food at a Spago pace. Suddenly, Prentiss appears behind me, seemingly out of nowhere, and introduces himself. He has bright-white combed-back hair and a permanent tan, and is wearing a dark-suede bomber jacket. He looks like a movie producer. (Then again, everyone his age out here looks like a movie producer.)

“Doctors and scientists are still treating alcoholism as if it is the problem, when it has nothing at all to do with the problem,” Prentiss tells me. “They might as well be studying scratchism for people who have a chronic itch.” Prentiss insists that one of his major goals is to “see the word *alcoholism* eliminated from the English language.”

Pax Prentiss arrives. At 34, he’s a younger version of his dad: tall, surfer-blond, buffed and tan. With steel-gray shark eyes and the slinky, swaying body language that junkies never seem to lose, he looks at me with a suspicion he tries to hide but can’t. The three of us sit down in his father’s office.

Prentiss immediately tells me the I Ching is “the greatest book ever written,” that “it tells the future with 100 percent accuracy.” He tells me he has written more books on the I Ching than any writer in the world. I wonder if that’s true, seeing as how I am currently surrounded by I Ching books written by an author named *Wu Wei* — titles like *I Ching Wisdom* and *I Ching Life*, *I Ching Readings*, *The I Ching Workbook*, *The I Ching: The Book of Answers*. *Wu Wei*, it turns out, is Prentiss’ pen name. It means “no name.” All his books are self-published under his own imprint, *Power Press*.

Prentiss explains that his cure techniques simply involve intense around-the-clock therapy. When I ask why he charges \$67,550 a month for this cure, he says, “These are the finest therapists on the planet, and when you start to hire that kind of people, they cost a lot of money.”

Prentiss then tells me of being interviewed recently by an alcoholic reporter from *The Times* of London. He says he quickly determined the reporter’s underlying problem and cured him on the spot. When I point out that he just told me he needed 20 therapists around the clock for nearly 70 grand a month to do what he himself did in just 20 minutes, his voice drops to a more sinister register, his smile disappears and he says, “You’re actually smarter than you think you are.”

Passages is the result of Chris Prentiss’ 10-year battle to save his son’s life. A heroin addict since the age of 18, Pax had been raised in the plush serenity of Pacific Palisades. Why he became an addict completely baffled his father, who dedicated his life to saving his son.

“I took him to drug therapists, alcohol therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists, addiction specialists and counselors of every sort,” Prentiss recalls.

Pax has a personal drug story that involves coke, alcohol, mushrooms, pot, crack, acid, speed and Ecstasy. All of this led to a “\$300-a-day addiction to the finest tar heroin money could buy,” he gloats in his dad’s controversial book *The Alcoholism and Addiction Cure*.

Through it all, his father kept asking him, “Pax, why do you get high?” Pax would always respond, “Because it feels so good.”

“I put him in 30-day programs, 60-day programs and 90-day programs,” says Prentiss. “Nothing

worked. He was clean 40 times or more. Each time, he relapsed.”

That is, until Pax found out why he got high: He couldn't live up to his dad's achievements. Once this was revealed as the reason for his drug use, he was free of the clutches of addiction. He was cured. Or so say the Prentisses.

“That was the start of the world's most successful treatment center,” Pax writes.

Despite its staggering cost and a recommended 60-day commitment, Prentiss insists that Passages is not the exclusive retreat of celebrities and the wealthy. “We do have some celebrities on occasion, but primarily, it is middle-class America. People mortgage their houses, max out their credit cards, sell assets, whatever it takes to get here.”

According to Prentiss, everything happens for a reason — a *good* reason. There are no bad events. The universe doesn't make mistakes. It's perfect. I think of 9/11 but don't bother to offer up such an obvious banality.

When I ask why the universe is perfect, Prentiss tells me, “Because it's 16 billion years old.”

I ask him if he is suggesting simply that age equals perfection.

“The universe is perfect,” he repeats, like a mantra.

“What about black holes, death stars and solar flares?” I ask.

He stares at me like I am an idiot, which of course is obvious.

“Is the universe going to disappear tomorrow?” he asks.

“Probably not,” I respond sheepishly.

“Ah, so there you are,” he says, smiling that smile. “The universe is perfect.”

Fashion designer Marc Jacobs is perfect. I know that because Chris Prentiss tells me so.

“He has *I am Perfect* tattooed around his wrist,” says Prentiss, gesturing. “He is cured of addiction.”

After just 18 days in an Arizona rehab, Jacobs headed to Passages in August of 2007 because of the promises of no group therapy. “That was annoying,” Jacobs told CNN's Brooke Anderson for *Showbiz Tonight* on location at Passages. “I like the idea of being cured as opposed to being forever an alcoholic or forever an addict.”

This parrots a line Prentiss says to me in his office.

How long did it take the designer to be cured from a lifetime of addiction? “I think for me a month is enough,” Jacobs told Anderson. “I feel like I could leave today and never drink and drug again.”

I ask if he has seen Jacobs recently, but Prentiss demurs, saying only, “He is doing very, very well. He's doing exceptionally well.”

On Chris Prentiss' desk is a framed photo of a tough-looking, elderly white-haired woman. This is Prentiss' mother, Bea, who died recently at the age of 92. According to Prentiss, she carried a gun until the day she kicked the bucket, after which Prentiss celebrated with a lavish dinner, he says, to reinforce his good-reason-for-everything philosophy.

In Prentiss' most recent self-published book, *Zen and the Art of Happiness*, this one bearing his own name, he describes the strange, sad story of his mother's life. In New Jersey in 1915, he writes, Bea was

raped and then forced to marry her attacker. After her divorce three years later, she turned to a life of crime, and eventually employed a large criminal gang while turning into a Ma Barker type, heading a stolen-car ring out of Jersey and a crew of con artists across the Hudson in the Big Apple. When Prohibition began, she expanded into bootlegging. It seemed like a natural move. When Prentiss was born, she taught him how to rob, steal and be part of the gang. “Never tell the truth,” she counseled. “Only fools tell the truth. If you do, it will get you in trouble.”

“So I lied and cheated and stole and I was highly praised for it,” Prentiss writes. “She taught me shoplifting when I was four. She also told me no one could be trusted, particularly women.”

“When I grew older,” he adds, “my business dealings were always shady.”

In 1965, at the age of 25, Prentiss headed to Southern California. “Help Me, Rhonda” was blasting from radios at the time. As with many whose checkered pasts brought them to L.A., Prentiss’ journey led directly to the film business. In 1976, he wrote, produced and directed *Goin’ Home*, a family drama about a runaway boy and his dog, which is falsely accused of biting someone. Boy and dog split Florida and head for California. On the way, they meet a hobo, a shoeshine man, an abused boy and a very bad guy who chases them.

Prentiss never released another film, which is understandable if you watch *Goin’ Home*. Like so many post-Hollywood movie mavens before and after him, Prentiss schemed and scammed to find another way to make a steady living. He sold real estate. Then, at 40, he discovered the I Ching and began running so-called *Power Workshops* based on its teachings. The workshops were so successful, Prentiss was invited to produce a number of TV and radio shows. He dedicated his new life to teaching the I Ching, mostly to Southern Californians in search of anything but themselves.

Problem was, he says, he couldn’t truly understand the text until his head was partially crushed by a boulder. In 1993, while he and Pax were gathering rocks for a landscaping project in Malibu, a *Raiders of the Lost Ark*-size boulder Prentiss was trying to dislodge suddenly came loose and landed on his head. “I was slammed into the ground with such force that two bones were broken in my left hand. ... I was lying face-down in the mud, unable to breathe and unable to move because all my vertebrae had been compressed and I was paralyzed,” he says. As he lay there trying desperately to suck oxygen into his mouth through the Malibu mud, Prentiss says, the only thought running through his head was, “I wonder what good thing will come from this?”

Talk about the power of positive thinking. This was the “white-light experience” the former filmmaker had been seeking.

“One week later, I was lying in bed recovering,” he recalls. “I picked up the I Ching, and the passages that had earlier baffled me were now understandable. Somehow that blow to my head had opened the channels that allowed me to perceive the meanings of what had before been unintelligible.”

Wu Wei then took over, and went on to write 10 books on the I Ching.

“All that was a result of the rock smashing my head,” says Prentiss.

In the years that followed, he ran his workshops, produced his books and repeatedly attempted to save his son from the spiral of addiction. Pax and his dad say they stumbled on their “cure” for addiction out of luck and desperation. Claiming to have had it with 12-step stuff, Pax decided to throw the kitchen sink at his multiple drug habit. His plan was to implement every East/West form of high-end therapy simultaneously and see what happened.

According to Pax, it worked. He became free of addiction. During his first moments of clarity, sobriety and fantasy, Pax had an entrepreneurial epiphany. He convinced his dad that they should create their own rehab. And not just any rehab.

Passages Malibu opened in 2001. Today, while Pax does many of the meet and greets and focuses on the younger clients, Prentiss continues to run his metaphysics workshops and propagate his belief that the universe is perfect, and every single bad event that happens to you is for the better. The most visceral example of this philosophy is cited by Prentiss himself in *The Alcoholism and Addiction Cure*.

One woman in his class, a victim of incestuous rape, he writes, yells out angrily that Prentiss' philosophical statement is "the stupidest, most ridiculous utterance I've ever heard. You wouldn't say that if it was you who was raped!" After a long silence, Prentiss calmly replies to the woman, "I was raped in the sixth grade," then quickly adds, "but I'm not so foolish as to let that event ruin the rest of my life."

Prentiss now tells me how his system of workshops and therapy can actually cure addiction: "Our powerful treatment methods provide total recovery from addiction through intensive individualized therapy. Our fully customized treatment program first discovers and then heals the underlying causes of a person's addiction using one-on-one therapy."

Confused by Prentiss' claims, I later call Dr. Drew Pinsky, the noted addiction specialist. When I read Prentiss' statement to Pinsky, he states emphatically, "There's no evidence that aggressive therapeutic intervention early in the course of addiction does anything but make addicts want to get loaded more."

Of all his offbeat claims, Prentiss' "success rate" may be his most outlandish. In an industry where reputable facilities such as the Betty Ford Center and Hazelden wouldn't dare claim even a 25 percent cure rate, Prentiss sticks to his guns. He looks me square in the eyes and says: "We have an 84.4 percent success rate since we opened our doors in 2001, the highest in the world."

Prentiss says his cure rate is based on the latest survey involving 700 of his graduates, with whom he keeps in contact through phone calls and alumni gatherings.

I ask him how he could statistically compare someone who left his rehab sober seven years ago with someone who graduates tomorrow having spent 30 days off drugs. In 12-step programs, the person with 30 days sober is considered to be in the infancy of his or her sobriety. Prentiss doesn't see it that way. Once the car comes off the assembly line, it's ready to drive.

"It's easy," he grins. "They're both cured."

For more than 100 years, medical science has racked its collective brains trying to figure out just what causes addiction. Despite numerous theories, a consensus has never been reached among the world's doctors, scientists and researchers. Yet Chris Prentiss, the former filmmaker and real estate agent, and self-taught master of the I Ching, claims that he knows:

1. Chemical imbalance.
2. Unresolved events from the past.
3. Beliefs you hold that are inconsistent with what is true.
4. Inability to cope with current conditions.

Prentiss may be certain, but his former medical director is having none of it: "Chris Prentiss is not qualified to be talking like that," Dr. Hamlin Emory tells me by phone from his Beverly Hills office. "And no respectful physician would ever talk like that because you don't say that you know the cause."

"I will tell you one thing about Chris Prentiss," continues Dr. Emory, "he is the consummate Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey circus-barker showman."

It didn't take Emory long to reach the end of his rope with Prentiss. "I started [at Passages] from the beginning [in 2001]. I left in 2004, or late 2003. I resigned. I had to leave because he was interfering

with my work. He would be giving these Chinese teas that had up to 127 different compounds, and I need to medicate or test people at base line.”

I tell Emory the story of the interview in *The Times* of London in which Prentiss claims to have cured a man on the spot.

“He’s not Louis Pasteur! C’mon. He’s a marketer,” bellows Emory, almost spitting into the phone. “Now, I am embarrassed.” There is a brief pause as he gathers his thoughts. “It’s sad,” he continues. “The residential centers make lots and lots of money now preying on the ignorance of the medical profession’s inability to help these people.”

Dr. Emory, despite being a man of science, concludes, “The principles of the 12-step program are superb. They’re excellent.”

Prentiss remains unbowed, despite the fact that, in 1956, the American Medical Association declared that alcoholism is indeed a disease, as it meets the five criteria: a pattern of symptoms, chronicity, progression, subject to relapse and treatability.

“Today, having healed hundreds of people,” Prentiss boasts, “I can write with complete certainty that alcoholism and addiction are not diseases.”

On that episode of *Paula Zahn Now*, the Prentisses were joined by Pinsky. “I think [Prentiss] said it wasn’t a disease,” *said Pinsky, somewhat amused*. “I don’t know what you can cure other than diseases.”

Besides contradicting the AMA, Prentiss also maintains a one-sided propaganda war with Alcoholics Anonymous. He fuels this by espousing numerous dubious claims against the organization. For instance, he says that A.A. “is only open to those who are willing to publicly declare themselves to be alcoholics or addicts and who are willing to give up their inherent right of independence by declaring themselves powerless over addictive drugs and alcohol.”

In fact, A.A. simply states in its 3rd Tradition: “The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.” Prentiss knows that A.A. has no official spokesperson to rebut his claims.

He also tells me that “only 5 percent of the people who go to A.A. ever come back again.” When I ask where he had learned this number, he replies, “From A.A.’s own Web site.” A complete search of the Alcoholics Anonymous Web site reveals no such statistic.

“Do you know what the first step is?” he asks me with an impish grin. “That you are powerless. How silly. We’re not powerless!”

When I point out that his son Pax was certainly powerless when he was battling addiction for 10 years, he shoots back, “Well, he’s not powerless now!”

Prentiss excuses himself to take an important conference call. He and Pax move to their adjoining desks, don electronic phone headsets and stare straight ahead into space like the pilot and co-pilot of a contemporary Spruce Goose preparing for takeoff. Upon contact with the other party, Prentiss begins berating the poor bastards. While I only hear half of the story, the theme is apparent: The operators of the 800 phone service for ordering his books are not closing the sale on customers at a high enough rate. I am ushered out of the office by Prentiss’ chagrined assistant, as father and son yell into space.

Jeannie J. is a 45-year-old divorced heiress who had headaches. Really bad headaches, it seems. Her befuddled doctors back in Wichita prescribed her higher and higher doses of painkillers until she was finally hooked on OxyContin. In a madcap medical merry-go-round, her addiction led the doctors to prescribe her methadone to get her off the original drug. After she attempted suicide, her concerned family sent her to Passages.

“I was on methadone for four and a half months,” Jeannie whispers into the phone from her four-star

hotel residence in Beverly Hills. “And when I got there, they said, you know, we don’t get people off of methadone. They did it [to me] cold-turkey and that was extremely hard. I had to go to the hospital two weeks into it.”

The hospital administered shots of buprenorphine. Employees from Passages arrived later and took her back to the rehab, where she remained for three months.

“My back nerve endings are dead from it. I’ve had back pain ever since,” she tells me.

Jeannie is no simple country gal. The petite bleached blonde has a B.A. in fine arts from the University of Kansas. A mother of two girls, Jeannie comes from family money and married a wealthy man in the import/export business. When their marriage splintered, so did her stability. She spiraled deeper and deeper into a suicidal abyss.

“I was [at Passages] for three months in 2003, then I went home and came back for a month and a half. I spent over a quarter of a million,” she declares matter-of-factly.

Jeannie did return to Wichita, but she was not alone. A *Passages*-assigned *companion*, at a rate of \$60 an hour for 24 hours a day, seven days a week, stayed with her for two months. When she mentioned in passing that she missed drinking wine, she was hustled back to *Passages* for an additional month and a half.

“The doctor there, Dr. Emory, he did help people with headaches though. He gave me Adderall. He still gives me that. He also gives me Suboxone and Neurontin.”

Jeannie now lives alone in a swanky but lonely hotel on Doheny Drive. On some nights, she actually gets dressed to go out but then realizes she doesn’t have the nerve and retreats.

“At night, I drink champagne because of the pain, but I want to try and quit doing that,” she tells me with some hope in her voice.

After spending a quarter of a million dollars at *Passages*, Jeannie now realizes, “There is no cure, I know that now. So I don’t get what they’re saying.”

And she’s not alone. Billy N. is a blond 28-year-old who resembles the late Heath Ledger. He’s the cool kid from the sticks outside Kansas City, the one who read Burroughs, Nietzsche and Kerouac in the seventh grade. The one who can’t wait to leave home, who starts taking drugs at an early age to help expedite matters.

Tucked into a booth at the House of Pies in Los Feliz, Billy rarely looks up while he picks at his remaining, limp fries. His skin is so colorless he could pass for a corpse. As he explains his drug expedition to me, his voice, barely audible, forces me to lean over a table of scattered chicken-quesadilla remains just to hear him.

Four years ago, Billy entered Passages with a needle-heroin habit. Months before, when the senior Prentiss called Billy and his father in Missouri, he made Billy a promise he said he could take to the bank.

“He just kept saying, ‘You will get a tan. You will leave here with a tan,’” whispers Billy.

I laugh as this paleface just smirks at me.

“Chris told me he had a 90 percent success rate or higher,” Billy recalls. “After two months, the entire medical staff recommended I could leave. When Chris found out, he freaked and said to them, ‘He’s not going anywhere.’ He spoke to my dad and said, ‘If you let him leave, you’ll be sentencing him to a relapse. The only way to prevent your son from relapsing is to keep him in here for at least one more month.’ ”

Dipping his final fry in a puddle of mayo, Billy continues, “I explained to my dad that everyone in the entire place says I’m ready to go, and it was only the guy who owned the place and making the profit who has an issue with me leaving.

“Chris hadn’t even had a conversation with me in over a month because I had gotten to know him and written him off as a lunatic,” Billy laughs. “I decided I was going to enjoy my time there and get the best recovery out of being there, and part of that was not having anything to do with Chris Prentiss while I was there.”

Despite the pressure to stay another month, Billy took part in the talking-stick ceremony after 60 days and some \$100,000 of his parents’ money. One of the first things Billy did to celebrate was to smoke two eight balls of crack in a reunion with three other “cured” grads after renting a luxury hotel room on Ocean Avenue in Santa Monica. Combined, the four upscale crack heads had spent more than \$300,000 on the *Passages* cure. The two eight balls, by contrast, cost around 500 bucks.

Today, Billy resides somewhat peacefully in the Hollywood Hills. He has been totally clean and sober for almost two years by working a vigorous A.A. 12-step program. Billy’s dad dropped nearly a hundred grand on the “cure,” but at least his son is alive and sober. That’s all he cares about.

Billy does not regret the past. He just wishes to shut the door on this chapter. Some others *do* regret the past and want to reopen the door.

“I went there twice, in ’04 *and* ’05. I went two months each time,” declares Stuart R., a 47-year-old former executive for an international computer firm. Like Jeannie, Stuart also spent a quarter of a million dollars at *Passages*.

“Prentiss starts throwing that number around, the 85 percent cure rate. The thing that’s hard to believe is that he sticks to the story,” says Stuart, who tells his tale like he has been waiting for someone to find him for years. I know this because he actually tells me so. I ask him how long the cure lasted when he left *Passages* the first time.

“I got loaded the same day.”

I tell him that despite Prentiss’ denouncements of 12-step programs, I saw residents’ schedules on the wall that indicated optional A.A. meetings.

“When I was there, we did six or seven [A.A.] meetings a week. Two or three in-house and the rest out,” he says. “And they were mandatory. When Chris wrote his book [*The Alcoholism and Addiction Cure*], that ended. That’s when he decided A.A. was the villain, because he decided he could make a fortune if he just claimed he had found the cure for alcoholism.”

The business executive continues in an upbeat, almost appreciative tone: “Chris has a brilliant scheme that they have cooked up there. He has the perfect sales pitch.” His voice suddenly drops. “I know. I fell into it. It’s a beautiful sales pitch when someone is at the end of their rope.”

When I tell Stuart I couldn’t find any of the success stories Prentiss brags about, he tells me, “People come in there, they fail and nobody can call him on it. He’s got clients with confidentiality agreements to hide behind.”

How did anybody at all get sober, I ask? The answer, says Stuart, is the ironic one: A.A. I remind Stuart just how adamant Prentiss was with me in mocking A.A.

“Chris was having trouble filling the beds, and the minute he changed the message, they filled to the brim. He created a cash machine,” Stuart says. “After my stay in ’05, I was invited back as someone early in recovery, and I started talking of all the people I had been there with who had relapsed. And my message was, this is a great place, it’s just not gonna teach you anything about staying sober when you

leave.”

According to Stuart, a woman in the group stood up and asked him about the 84.4 percent cure rate. A grumble started through the group. The next week, a sign was put up saying that the A.A. alumni meetings were canceled until further notice. Stuart was persona non grata at *Passages*.

What about that 84.4 percent?

“I liken Chris and Pax to a couple of circus barkers,” Stuart says, laughing. “Your first clue that that number is total bullshit is that it never changes.”

I ask Stuart how he feels personally about Prentiss. “He’s a strange, strange man,” he replies, “and he’s got a wonderful *Ponzi* scheme going. And he’s got nothing to stop him. He’s smart enough to see that there’s nothing that could bring him down, and he’s going to continue doing it.”

Does Stuart know of *anyone* who went through Passages who is sober today?

“I don’t know of anybody who went through there who doesn’t go to A.A. and stayed sober,” he says.

Stuart says he has been clean and sober for three years. How has he processed all this?

“I struggled with the anger about this whole thing for a long time, and I let it go. That is, until friends of mine started dying,” he says. “When I saw [Prentiss] doing his parade of press interviews, he kept quoting the [cure] number. I owe it to the alcoholic or addict who is still suffering to let them know that he does not have the cure.”

There is a long, awkward silence, then this:

“I scraped ex-clients out of seedy hotels, that’s why I have firsthand knowledge. I actually cleaned up the mess. The first thing they would say to me was, ‘Omigod, I relapsed,’ and the second thing was, ‘Please don’t tell anyone at Passages. Chris will be disappointed in me. I must be hopeless.’ They believed the 85 percent cure rate and felt like complete losers.”

Stuart suggests I seek out Dr. Jason Giles, the medical director who succeeded Dr. Emory at Passages. “Giles was very uncomfortable with the success-rate claim,” he says. “He was an old friend of Chris’ from way back. They ended up having a pretty large falling-out.”

I reach Dr. Giles on the phone at the Malibu home he shares with his wife and their two young children. Although he is actually featured prominently in Prentiss’ controversial book *The Alcoholism and Addiction Cure*, on the phone, Giles is prone toward long pauses regarding Passages and Chris Prentiss.

He repeatedly hedges when asked to talk about Prentiss, but finally says, “The interesting part, I think, is how people are vulnerable to charlatans. I think these rehabs are modern-day quackery.”

Then he lowers his voice to a whisper and adds, “I’ve been in contact with a lot of my former patients from when I was there and the data, the data do not come anywhere near what he is quoting as his success rate.”

He pauses dramatically, and then continues, “I have five times the data than anyone else, and the results are no better than any other treatment center. And that’s by report at variable lengths of time.”

I ask him why he is telling me this.

“My primary motivation is to help the patients I have, and to help others down the road.”

I ask Giles if he thinks speaking out will do any good. He thinks this over carefully and says, “I cannot imagine a situation where Mr. Prentiss would say, ‘Well, shucks, okay, yeah. I was misrepresenting here.’”

I can't imagine that ever happening."

'I flipped cars doing 150 mph. I was in intensive care for two months — wheelchair bound. Took out a whole city block another time and nearly died in that one."

Mark Bufe is a 32-year-old real estate executive and former binge drinker now living on a farm in southern Illinois with his wife, Kristin Merrill, and their 3-year-old. Both are graduates of Passages, and are recommended to me by Chris Prentiss when I call him back and tell him that not everyone seems to agree with his 84.4 percent recovery data. Since he left Passages, says Bufe over the phone, he has had no cravings to drink. "It's been four years. It doesn't even enter my mind."

How did Passages cure him? "It put closure to some internal issues I had."

Bufe says he has no such issues today, and in the four years since graduating, he has not attended one A.A. meeting. "No A.A. meeting," he says, "no anything."

He does, however, admit that A.A. played a pretty large role in his and Merrill's life at Passages: "We went to A.A. meetings pretty regularly. The in-house meetings were daily. Outside meetings, pretty much every day."

That's a lot of A.A. for a place that says it's unnecessary and overly negative. Bufe seems uncomfortable with the subject and turns me over to Merrill, a perky 30-year-old raised in Santa Barbara. When I ask how long she's been clean, she begins to ramble: "I think, well, it's almost four years. ... I lose count. I don't really pay attention anymore 'cause it's so crazy — we don't go to A.A. or anything like that, 'cause we don't need it! We just don't think about it anymore! Honestly, it's not really a part of our lives at all. And it's weird, because I was a bad addict. I was a straight-up heroin addict."

"First I smoked it, then snorted it," Merrill continues. "The last part of my addiction, I was shooting it." At one point, she says this went on for four years — from age 21 to 25 — but later says that for the first three years, she mostly took pills. In any case, that last year, she shot dope "until I couldn't find any veins to hit." She claims her habit cost \$500 a day.

I can see why Prentiss suggested I call Bufe and Merrill. They're good spokespeople for the program. In fact, Merrill admits that she's told the story before, and often; that she and Bufe are the go-to couple for Prentiss when potential clients are on the fence about dropping almost 70 grand for a one-month visit to Malibu.

Sometimes, Merrill answers questions I haven't asked. At one point, she blurts out, "I don't think Passages is ripping people off."

I ask if she ever feels bad or wants to alter her mood.

"No, never!" she replies quickly. "I am normal now."

Why can't she drink and use like normal people?

"Because then I won't want to stop," she says.

When I point out that that is not normal, she sounds befuddled. What does she do now that is more fun than slamming china white on a cool summer night?

"I have fun with other things. We go watch scary movies!"

In my last conversation with Prentiss, he not only recommended I speak to Bufe and Merrill, but he also had a few choice words regarding his critics — and former employees — doctors Emory and Giles. Responding to Emory's comments that Prentiss is not qualified to say he knows the cause of addiction, Prentiss says, "Okay, that's his story. My side of the story was that we actually forbid him to work here

because he overmedicated people. He believed, and he said — and this is why I let him go — he said that every person who comes to Passages should be medicated. Forever!”

Told of these claims, Emory responds, “I don’t medicate people unless I see abnormalities. And I find it fascinating to be debating a person who has no education and just a real estate licence.”

As for Giles, Prentiss seems stunned that I even mention his name. He gathers his thoughts and then brings the noise: “Giles is a very sweet guy. A very sweet guy who turned out to be a skunk!” Prentiss stammers. “I was Jason’s mentor for more than 20 years. When I met Jason, he was a high school dropout. He came to work for me in my seminars. Then he went to work for me as a real estate agent. He got his doctor’s license, got into anesthesiology and was discovered to be using drugs. I gave him this very cushy job here, where he was making over \$1 million a year.” Prentiss makes other charges that appear to be unfounded, including one that Giles kept fees that should have gone to Passages.

Dr. Giles’ response is swift and adamant: “It is true we met when I was 16. It is true that I dropped out of high school. It is true that I had problems with drugs and alcohol. I never had a job at Passages. What is true is that I had direct relationships with each of the patients. What is true is that [the Prentisses] wanted money that they’re not eligible for. It wasn’t enough that they’re charging \$60,000 a month. They wanted my professional fees for interpreting complex lab tests and everything else they could get their hands on. It’s against the law.

“I’m one of the few people who have intimate, factual knowledge of how Passages runs its practice,” Giles says. “Therefore, I must be destroyed by Prentiss. He can say anything he wants to. What reputation does he have? He’s just a real estate salesman. It makes me sad and angry. It’s just awful.”

And so it goes at Passages Malibu, where, according to Chris Prentiss, the universe is perfect, and everything happens for a reason — a good reason.

[Also read Going Undercover at Impact House and Rehab or Bust: A Guide to L.A.'s Drug and Alcohol Treatment Centers by Mark Groubert](#)