

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears above any article. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

Church helps fathers find their way again

By [Gabrielle Russon](#)

Published: Friday, June 14, 2013 at 4:39 p.m.

For a moment, his eyes well up with tears as he thinks about the ache of losing everything. His wife. His three children. His freedom.

He is learning how to forgive himself, how to let go of those mistakes he made. He savors the moments as he tries to prove he could be a good dad.

On a recent day his eldest daughter, tall and skinny like a stringbean, wanted a hamster for her 6th birthday. She wanted to name it

"Beauty," so he helped pick up a gray hamster with a black stripe that matched the description.

He is such a softie now, he ended up spontaneously buying two fish for his other children.

There is his 4-year-old daughter who amazes him by how high she can count and that she knows the alphabet so well.

The baby of the family is his 3-year-old son, with blonde hair and blue eyes, just like his wife. The little boy brags that he inherited his muscles from his dad.

For the past year, the three children have lived with his mother in the Tampa suburbs because the state had taken them away.

Kris Gutierrez wants them back.

"It's really important for me to be a good dad," Gutierrez, 28, says. "That's all I want to do."

That's how Gutierrez ended up here, in a Sarasota church sanctuary, Thursday night.

The Harvest of Sarasota church is in a worn-out neighborhood on Lime Avenue, near a funeral home, a dollar store and a discount grocery store — not exactly the ideal inspirational setting to rediscover yourself and realize your purpose.

But here, Gutierrez is finding his way again.

The church is connected to the Harvest House Transitional Center, which provides rehabilitation and live-in treatment for substance abuse, and offers anger management and parenting classes.



STAFF PHOTO / DAN WAGNER

Kris Gutierrez, right, participates in a Fathers in Families program at Harvest Tabernacle in Sarasota on Thursday evening.

Gutierrez's life story weaves with some of the other attendees here.

Time to celebrate

They are men who cannot describe what their fathers' faces look like, or perhaps would rather forget those faces altogether.

They are humans who felt like they no longer mattered as the demons of drugs overtook them.

"Somewhere along the way I lost myself," says Dan Bowman, 37, a father of three who is celebrating nine months of sobriety.

During their dark years, some were homeless or lived in motels. Others, including Gutierrez, spent time in jail. Gutierrez was released March 5, 2012, after serving 17 months for robbery.

The majority of the residents pay to stay in the 92 treatment beds — \$175 for men, \$145 for women each week — while the Veterans Affairs and the Florida Department of Corrections pay for about a third of the beds.

On Thursday Bowman and Gutierrez, tan and still dressed in his work uniform from building swimming pools, pray together.

They are joined by seven other men, including one who brought a chubby baby, for a weekly class to learn how to be better fathers.

The group is tight-knit. They trust each other and understand in many ways how their stories are the same.

Today their families will join them to celebrate completing the Fathers in Families program.

The class, taught by a family therapist, doesn't seem revolutionary, but again, these are things they never really thought about before.

They role-play and analyze a kinder way to talk to their spouses.

They learn to show empathy and be a gentler father who is not afraid to get down on the floor and play.

They try their best to examine their childhoods for clues into how they became the men they are now.

There are signs of hope for Gutierrez.

His wife, who once wanted a divorce, changed her mind and wants to get back together, he says.

Gutierrez realizes it's OK to cry and show emotion. He isn't a gang member anymore. He doesn't have to be so tough. He can carry his daughters on his shoulders and weep in front of his son.

"I wasn't shown how to really love someone," Gutierrez says. "I'm being shown a better definition of what love is."

Copyright © 2013 HeraldTribune.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.