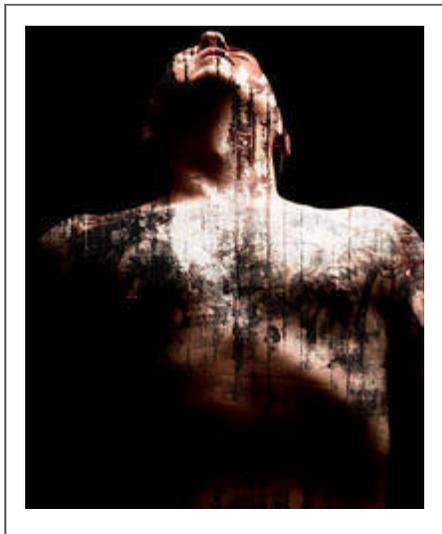


# Going Undercover at Impact House

## Hardcore recovery

By Mark Groubert

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**"Lift your nut sack."**

(Click to enlarge)

I hope I never hear this phrase again.

Popeye, a 50-year-old, cornrowed black dude wearing white surgical gloves, is now pointing out what to look for to a concerned 20-something kid named Manny. I am their anatomical test dummy. I stand stark naked in a small shower room at *Impact Drug and Alcohol Treatment Center in Pasadena*. It's the most hardcore rehab in town, they say. I am quickly finding out why.

"Now turn around, bend over, and spread 'em," barks my anal examiner. Manny gives me two paper towels to stand on while

Popeye does his examining. Manny looks on like a protégé admiring his mentor. Even I, a pretty damn good extrovert, cannot come up with any small talk.

**[Also read \*Addiction: Buying the Cure at Passages Malibu and Rehab or Bust: A Guide to L.A.'s Drug and Alcohol Treatment Centers\* by Mark Groubert](#)**

For the record, only Jim Stilwell, the legendary executive director of *Impact*, knows I am here undercover. When I first suggested the idea to Stilwell, a burly 60-ish biker type with a walrus mustache, I had to drop a bunch of names to widen his comfort zone. But to his credit, the savvy ex-junkie quickly got it. He had nothing to hide. According to Stilwell, everything would be standard operating procedure. I would be processed as a regular resident and treated as such for the duration of my stay. No employee or patient would know why I was there.

After an hour's worth of paperwork, I am led into the main yard of the 130-bed facility. I have never been a patient in a rehab, and it's like walking into another world. Some really hard-looking men (and women) chain-smoke on the outside patio. There is no swimming pool here, no equine therapy or "talking sticks." There are carrots but no carrot juice.

I am given the 21-page Residential Client General Rules. A young gap-toothed kid named Michael takes me into a tiny, empty office to go over them page by page. It takes an hour.

There are many, many rules. Most are harsh, some are weird: *No sunglasses, no tattoo paraphernalia and no haircutting articles. Portable TVs are allowed in rooms if the resident is Third Phase. Second Phase residents may have radios. No radios or TVs for First Phase residents.* It all seems very foreign. Very cultish. Very prisonlike.

After the examination, I'm finally turned over to my impatient "daddy" — someone who shadows

your every move for the first few days. You are his “baby.” In fact, everyone calls you baby. Not in the Sinatra way but in the infant way. It is all very humiliating. This is by design.

My daddy is a 50-year-old Latin gangbanger named Lorenzo, who did 21 years in prison for various infractions, one of them beating a man nearly to death with a pipe for refusing to pay his rent on some property Lorenzo owned. Lorenzo was a professional dope slinger. He also put in custom-made windows. He tells me he had seven years clean, when he “got busy and stopped going to N.A. meetings.”

In Impact for the past six months, he had worked his way up to Phase 3, the highest at this facility, when he was inexplicably de-phased back to square one. As he told me his crime/addiction/recovery story in the tiny cubicle that was his room, his eyes moistened. He took pride in Phase 3. He couldn’t fathom what he had done to deserve this “demotion.”

“I need to keep these in my pockets,” he mumbles, gesturing to his fists. He is a tightly wound guy. Very rarely smiles. When he does, it seems forced. Like someone is watching, and he has to do it. He is a good man. He wants it bad. I hope he makes it.

Lorenzo passes me an additional set of handwritten rules, headlined: “Getting Your Wings.” (Getting your wings is Impact-speak for shedding your Daddy.) I read the forbidden “Five F’s”:

1. Fighting
2. Fucking
3. Fixing
4. Flirting
5. Fruiting

The first one, I quickly get. No fighting. Easy. The third rule, no fixing. I can see that. Numbers two and four, fucking and flirting — these are really, really frowned upon. (As we walk through the woman’s section, I am instructed to yell, “Man walking here,” which I do rather meekly. I’m so terrified that I keep my eyes averted and my head down.) But number five? Fruiting? What is fruiting? Is it like fisting but with a papaya?

I would later learn from John Albert, who spent 18 months in Impact and ended up working on its staff from 1985 to 1987, that “it all started with [Epitaph Records founder and Bad Religion guitarist] Brett Gurewitz. He would get his dealer to throw oranges loaded with dope in there, then he would sit up at night and do speedballs.”

At the store, I’m given a “fish kit” as the new “fish” on the yard. It’s a sealed bag containing shampoo, deodorant, toothpaste, a toothbrush, a comb and a plastic razor. The brand name for these generic products? Maximum Security. How appropriate. While this is clearly not a Level 4 facility, the vibe of prison permeates everything, from lingo and body language to food distribution.

There's a reason for this. The bulk of Impact residents are here because of Proposition 36, a 2001 measure that dedicated \$120 million annually for five years to providing rehab rather than imprisonment for drug-related offenses. Los Angeles County mandated four- to six-month stays for nonviolent first- and second-time drug offenders diverted to facilities such as Impact. Almost 40,000 Californians enter treatment each year through Prop. 36, which, according to advocates, has saved taxpayers \$1.3 billion over five years. Private-pay or "blue cluster" clients, who pay about \$7000\* a month, are supposedly treated a little better and live in "Beverly Hills," a newer housing unit up above the main yard. I claimed I was private pay for simplicity's sake, but I will apparently live in the "ghetto cluster," where everyone starts out.

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I am already exhausted when I am finally processed into my sliver of a room, a two-bunk rectangle for four, which is about 125 square feet with a small bathroom serving two units. This is considered the "ghetto" of the *Impact* housing plan. It is spotless. Residents are instructed to treat it like a military barracks and clean it around the clock.

I check my backpack, which has finally been searched and cleared. My wallet has been stripped of its cash. My credit cards are gone. Strangely, they miss my mouthwash, which has alcohol in it. I notice my medications have been taken from my bag. I am told I must report to the "med room near Beverly Hills" at 7 a.m. to get my medication dose.

When I go up there the next morning, half-asleep, a gigantic gang guy named Flores, with actual words tattooed in script across his forehead, is smirking at me. I soon realize why, as he hands me my meds. One pill each of Synthroid and Lipitor. I feel small.

My cellmates — I mean my roomies — are a 300-pound, 40-year-old Mississippi-raised cracker named Luke, a 28-year-old Romanian named Dragna and a muscular, black 50-year-old armed robber named Ronnie Z. Dragna has a swastika tattooed on his stomach and is not a fan of Gypsies and Jews. We discuss the reign of Romanian president Ceausescu, and I quickly nickname him Borat. It immediately sticks.

Everyone in here tells you his or her story. It takes hours. But these guys are used to doing time, so they take their time in the telling. Ronnie Z. tells me the details of the armed robbery in Pasadena, which sent him to prison in 1976, causing him to miss both the 1980s and the 1990s. I learn how heroin is smuggled into Folsom. Don't ask. I learn about "diesel therapy," the feds' treatment of convicts who have info they want. Okay, you asked: They are shackled aboard a *Con Air*-like plane and flown all around the country for months on end. Dumped in local jails sometimes for just a few hours and then placed on another flight, all under the guise of being "transferred" to another federal pen. The transfer is never completed, and they are held incommunicado in the air and on the ground, sometimes for years, until they tell the feds what they want to hear.

I learn a lot in a very short time.

The bunk beds are so tightly spaced I stay up all night, fearing that the massive Luke up above will crush me to death when he rolls over, which he does like clockwork every 15 minutes. Oddly enough, despite the overabundance of ex-cons, I do not feel particularly threatened.

In the afternoon, men and women assemble in the cafeteria for God Box. When your name is called, you go up to this small wooden box and pull out a “fortune” that has some saying on it. These include things like: Who am I today? Am I here for me or someone else? Do I believe in myself? And other esoteric questions. If the rebellious audience does not consider the answer to be righteous, there are loud catcalls and heckles, which force the resident to stay and dig deeper. I pray my name isn’t called.

To keep the residents in line, Impactcounselors, themselves former residents, keep order through a series of reprimands that result in “extra duties.” A single reprimand equals one hour of extra duty. Residents who continue to accumulate reprimands may be subject to an “object lesson or special treatment plan as an alternative to discharge.”

Additional house chores and verbal gag orders are the most common “object lessons” today, but that wasn’t always the case. Stories abound of residents being ordered to dig their own graves with a spoon, or wear oven mittens for stealing. When the program was more “shame-based,” two fighting residents might be roped together — a technique referred to as “The Defiant Ones.” One former resident describes seeing someone wearing around his neck a sign that read “I know everything,” while carrying a mirror reflecting his face.

“There was this big, fat peckerwood dude claiming to be a hard-ass,” John Albert tells me, “so when the staff takes him to court, they find out his mom has been supporting him and his dope habit. So they shaved his head, put a pacifier in his mouth and made him wear a sign that said ‘Momma’s Boy.’ You couldn’t laugh, because it was against the rules, so people ran into buildings and you’d hear howling from within.” When I had mentioned this to Stilwell, he insisted those days are over, but several sources dispute that.

Stephen Levy-Mazin, a former resident (2001) and counselor (2003), recalls, “on Black Tuesday, all the counselors met and we discussed who we were throwing out. Then their names were called over the P.A. and they had to go to the porch. It was like a public shaming, and they had to sit there silently while the other residents looked on. Then someone gathered their stuff in a garbage bag, and we took them to the corner bus stop. It’s horrible.”

The constant confrontations, coupled with the conditions here, are beginning to have an effect on me. I try to concentrate on the task at hand.

**There is a sense of sensory** deprivation here at Impact. Not isolation, as you are never alone, but deprivation. There are no newspapers, no television; no music is heard and sleep is interrupted or truncated. It is not accidental. Sometimes brains do need washing. Impact washes brains.

Based mostly on *Narcotics Anonymous* with a little *Synanon thrown in*, the private nonprofit has been treating the hard cases since 1969, when one of the original founders stole the name from the back of a Panorama City bus bench that read: *Impact Advertising Company*.

“When Impact opened, if you were an addict and you went to an N.A. meeting and you were on parole, you could catch a parole violation for going where addicts congregate,” explains Stilwell, a Vietnam vet who has been clean for 34 years. “So meetings were clandestine; you had to enter the backdoor. Parole agents would sit out front with binoculars.”

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This Catch-22 led to a need for a place to go. A safe place. A place where it wasn't so easy for the cops to pin you.

Enter Impact, which began in Panorama City and moved several times before settling on this shady 3.5-acre site in Pasadena on July 4, 1973.

"That's when I came in. And then I left and then I came back in and then I got kicked out, and then I came back," says Stilwell, chuckling. "I've been back for 34 years. I didn't come in to be the director, I just didn't have anyplace else to go."

We're in Stilwell's dark, rustically furnished office, which overlooks Impact's parking lot and main yard, and from which he reflexively keeps an eye trained on the comings and goings of his *campus*.

"Everybody, from me on down, has been through Impact, including our doctors," he tells me. "We only hire graduates. This way, no one can say, 'You don't know what I'm going through.'"

Stilwell tells me how *Impact* was also instrumental in helping to launch the Los Angeles Drug Court program — one of the first of its kind in the United States — in the early '90s. "The City Attorney's Office basically culled the [drug-related, nonviolent] arrests for a specific area and [sent them] to a specific court. We would do an assessment and say this guy's been clean, he wants it, let's put him in a very structured outpatient program — but he gets to see the judge every week to 10 days. Then if he gets loaded, screw it, bring him into residential. It's pretty tightly monitored."

Today, drug courts are working in all 50 states and number nearly 2,000.

When I raise the subject of the luxury rehabs, Stilwell pauses before elaborating. "I've been to a lot of [A.A./N.A.] meetings, man," he says finally, "and I have yet to be in a meeting where someone stood up and took a six-month chip and said, 'Thank God for *Promises*.' I've heard it said about *Clare*. I've heard it about *Cri-Help*. I've heard it about *Impact*. But you just don't see that [in the luxury rehabs] because they're 30-day, wash-and-dry, fluff-n-fold. It's a chalk talk."

As for those questionable success rates claimed by certain luxury rehabs, Stilwell adds, "Hey, aversion therapy used to claim a 100 percent success rate!"

Impact doesn't claim any numerical success rate since it opened in 1969, yet "in that time we have treated 30,000 men and women for addiction," explains Arlene Philpott, the gregarious director of development, herself a recovering junkie and Impact grad. "The majority of our clients come through with no resources. Through state, county and federal funding we are able to accept them for treatment. The truth is that by helping one addict, we impact the lives of at least 20 people."

One of those addicts is Chris, a 28-year-old rich white kid from Encino, who is here to kick heroin. He had been to every rehab in town and could write a *Zagat* review for each of them. Chris tells me that he has been in and out of N.A. for years and even attended the N.A. World Convention last year. He confides that he is depressed by the fact that all of his friends are either

successful in the real world or successful in the sober world. He is neither, and is approaching 30 years of age all too fast.

I am starting to feel guilty listening to the residents' deep secrets and realizing that I will not be with them at the end of the line. Strangely enough, the fact that I am not detoxing from anything makes me feel like an outsider among outsiders. I am asked constantly what I am kicking. After a while, I simply say alcohol and coke. This seems to satisfy most. Some snicker and keep walking.

The thrill and the adventure of this secret operation are starting to wear off. Maybe I am too soft. Maybe I am too old. Maybe my brain has already been washed. I had planned to stay a week, but after just three days, I find myself climbing the walls. Psychically, at first, but then physically seems like a good idea too. Suddenly, I want out in the worst way. The place and the people are closing in on me.

By late Sunday night, I am done. My nerves are shot. I am spaced-out. I need a newspaper, my TiVo, a queen-size bed and yes, I'll admit it, lactose-free milk. I head into the counselor's office to request a roll-up, *or* discharge. Quietly, I try to explain my situation to the elderly, Superfly-looking guy named Maurice, who is holding down the fort on this night. He looks at me like I am crazy. Well, why wouldn't he? I am whispering and trying to explain that I am undercover doing a story on rehabs, and that only Jim Stilwell knows I am in here.

"It's Sunday night. He ain't around, man," Maurice barks.

I am desperately trying to avoid making a scene here. But it is only attracting more attention. I get into my crazy-white-guy-means-business voice, not loud but firm.

"Call Stilwell now," I insist.

The guy looks at me and realizes I'm being real about all this jazz. He makes the call, and when he gets off, he just nods like, "It's okay now, bro," and begins to process me out of there. After numerous signatures, I sign the final one: "Receipt of Locked Property." As Maurice reads off the paper, he simultaneously hands me the following: one Gold MasterCard credit card, one Coffee Bean card, one Blockbuster card, one HomeDepot card, one AAA card, one T-Mobilecell phone, one set of keys. They seem like long-lost friends.

Maurice calls for an escort. It is Flores, the guy with the words tattooed across his forehead, who dispensed my morning meds. He glares at me with a look that says, "What a loser."

I am forced to walk a gauntlet of gazes while being physically escorted out of Impact. Everyone in the place is watching me. In those looks, I sense both disdain and envy. For some inexplicable reason, I feel shame, as if I am letting my newfound friends down. I see Chris looking at me sadly. I try to go over to talk with him, maybe to explain, but Flores says, "Let's keep going here, man. You can't talk to nobody."

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I see Dragna waving mockingly to me from the cafeteria doorway. As I near the patio area, I notice enormous Luke looking at me through the window of our room. He seems confused.

When I cross through the massive steel gates out into the leafy world of northern Pasadena, I am suddenly filled with immense gratitude for my own personal freedom from the bondage of self.

The bottom line is that *Impact* is harsh, strict, humiliating and confrontational. Yet for many people, it works. It is in your face, in your shit and in your head. In the end it is sincere, no bullshit and one of the best programs in the country for hardcore addicts. I just pray I don't ever have to come here for real.

***Also read [Addiction: Buying the Cure at Passages Malibu](#) and [Rehab or Bust: A Guide to L.A.'s Drug and Alcohol Treatment Centers](#) by Mark Groubert***

\* **Editor's Note:** An earlier version of this story incorrectly stated that private-pay clients pay about \$500 a month. That number should have been \$7000 a month.