



(Barry Chin/Globe Staff)

Gerri Holland (left) and Cheryl Perrault lead a creative arts class at Serenity House.  
HOPKINTON

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## Two artists help women battle addiction

By Megan McKee, Globe Correspondent | December 24, 2009

Tucked away on a country road, the sprawling lodge once housed migrant workers for the Weston Nurseries operation in Hopkinton. Today, it's a temporary home to 20 to 30 women - some with babies - who are trying to recover from drug and alcohol addiction.

Like many treatment programs funded by the state, Serenity House has fewer resources than it used to. But two local residents, a writer and a visual artist, have started a creative arts program to help the women heal while starting their lives anew.

"Although some people have indeed been the victims of terrible trauma at some point in life, there is this more powerful potential to move past the trauma and suffering," said Cheryl Perreault, a poet, spoken-word performer, and cocoordinator of the Women's Arts Forum in Hopkinton.

The key, she said, is art. "Everyone has it within them."

Since summer, she and cocoordinator Geri Holland have been conducting workshops at the house, where women spend six to nine months dealing with their emotions, learning vocational and living skills, and eventually working.

Holland, a self-taught pastel artist and painter, handles the visual workshops, and Perreault handles the language sessions, though they plan to bring in other members of the Women's Arts Forum to share their talents.

Both say they've been overwhelmed by the response from Serenity House residents.

"I was really stunned by what they came up with," said Perreault. She said she was amazed by the women's readiness to share their inner selves through reading their works aloud.

Holland, too, was blown away by the work the women started producing after just a few short drawing exercises. "Their drawings were spectacular," she said.

One of those women is Sarah, 31, who asked to withhold her last name because she is in recovery. She came to Serenity House after a nine-month relapse into drug abuse. Struggling on and off with substance abuse since the age of 13, she had lost everything: her job, her apartment, and the relationship with her family.

"This is the single best decision I've ever made in my whole life," she said of coming to Serenity House, one of the South Middlesex Opportunity Council's regional programs. And Holland's workshops have been vital to rediscovering her lost interest in art, she said. "For me, art is a safe and healthy way to get out of myself. I lose sense of time and space, and it's really productive and healthy."

Perreault, 49, became involved with spoken-word performance and poetry 13 years ago when she gave up her high-stress, fast-paced career as a psychologist and Northeastern University lecturer to be a suburban stay-at-home mom.

Holland, 59, started exploring art while dealing with health issues in her 20s.

They say the fulfillment and awareness they've gotten from art cannot be matched, and arrived when they most needed it: during transition periods of their lives, just like the women at Serenity House.

Holland said she hopes the arts program is successful enough to launch as a separate nonprofit organization to help as many women as possible.

"Even if they never go back" to art, Holland said of the women in Serenity House, "they bring it to their next place of healing."

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