

Brush strokes with greatness

Welcome Center art program enables self-expression for those coping with mental health issues

By Michelle Miller-Carl, Journal News Editor
Ben Furtado/Auburn Journal



Brenda Dunlap holds a watercolor/colored pencil painting she did outside the Welcome Center, which has an arts and crafts program that helps those recovering from mental health issues express themselves through art.

Brenda Dunlap says she loses herself in her art. But she may have actually found herself in it.

After years of coping with depression and anxiety, Dunlap has finally been able to tap into her creative side, creating stunning works and realizing her true potential.

“I’m a very visual person,” says Dunlap, 46, of Auburn.

She is an active consumer at the Welcome Center, which has an arts and crafts program that helps those recovering from mental health issues express themselves through art.

Dunlap not only participates in the arts and crafts program, but helps organize it. She proudly shows off the closets of paint and supplies, although she says they always need more.

The Welcome Center is a place where people recovering from mental illness can find connections to the community. It is part of the Campaign for Community Wellness, an effort to coordinate and leverage key mental health initiatives and improve mental health care in Placer County.

The center is housed inside what once was a vocational rehab diner. Now, the center dishes out support.

People without phones or regular mail access can pick up messages on a board at the center. On the old cafeteria counter, consumers can find a bank of computers with Internet access and resume software. The center offers movies on Thursdays, grief and loss support groups on Wednesdays and live music every Friday. But most of all, a place for people to feel at home, Dunlap said.

“It’s a place to come meet other people like yourself,” Dunlap said. “You’re more than welcome to come in. Nobody’s going to judge you for what you look like. It’s a place for you to feel home away from home.”

Although staff direct some activities, the Welcome Center is primarily a peer-run program, said Maureen Bauman, director of Adult System of Care, which administrates the Welcome Center. The consumers operate many of the support groups and activities. They even took ownership of the name of the center, changing it from Drop-in Center to Welcome Center, a name they decided was more fitting.

Bauman said an estimated 35 people use the center each day.

But it's on Mondays when visitors to the welcome center can get their creative juices flowing. During arts and crafts time, consumers are able to paint, draw and exercise their creative spirit. The arts and crafts program helps people express a part of themselves.

There's a wide spectrum of styles to be found in the artists at the Welcome Center. One artist named Jennifer paints flowers with wavy lines that capture the fragility of petals. Francis likes to imitate the masters, from Van Gogh to Picasso. Debbie draws bears with round, teddy-bear like figures.

But the real standout from the arts and crafts group has been Dunlap.

Her artwork was hung during the California Institute for Mental Health's Consumer Art Show in Sacramento and is currently featured on the institute's Recovery Arts Program Web site (www.cimh.org/tabid/250/Defaul.aspx#). They are also available for purchase to support the artist and the program.

Dunlap was quite abashed when told she was going to be a featured artist.

"I was scared," she said. "Why me? Am I really that good?"

Dunlap's work takes a cue from Henri Matisse with her bright colors and shapes.

She gets ideas from coloring books, cards, "whatever I see."

"It's just me, my imagination," she said.

Although she's still affected by anxiety (she requested a counselor be with her during the interview), Dunlap opens up about her troubles with mental illness.

She has been diagnosed with depression, anxiety, "and a little bit of everything," she says.

"If I go into a store and there's a lot of people, I just want to get through the store," Dunlap said. "I start sweating and sometimes I don't realize it. People say, 'Brenda, why are you sweating so bad?' And I say I'm having an anxiety attack. I notice I can't be around a lot of people."

Medication has helped her take back her life — "You don't want to be around me when I'm off my meds," she says — but it's been a long time getting to where she is now.

In 1990, shortly after Mother's Day, Dunlap's mother passed away.

"I had to find a place to live," she said. "I had to find a job."

Living by herself was the toughest time in her life. Dunlap describes the difference between who she was during that dark time, and who she knew she could be.

“I could see outside and see this other person,” she said. “I could see her and I wanted to get to her because this person was broken.”

It was during this time that she was hospitalized for mental illness and diagnosed with anxiety and depression.

Dunlap lived in board and care homes and continued to struggle with depression.

“People said I need to get better. I need to advance, but I’d say ‘Oh no, I don’t want to,’” she said. “I gave up on life. I didn’t care.”

She knew she had to help herself because “nobody else will do it for me.”

Dunlap now lives independently with a roommate at the Auburn Greens. She has a support system including someone to help pay her bills. She works giving surveys to former mental health system consumers.

But it’s been art, something she couldn’t do during her depths of depression, that has given her the confidence to find herself and inspire others, friends say.

“She doesn’t realize what other people learn from her,” said Patti Haskell, client services counselor at the Welcome Center. “There’s a stigma to mental illness. And for her to come forward, we’re so proud of her here. She’s made so much progress, starting with her own power in a way she wasn’t able to do before. It’s been a boost to her self esteem.”

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The Recovery Arts Program is holding another call to recovering artists. If interested, contact Alice J. Washington at or (916) 556-3480, ext. 139.