

'Art of Recovery' exhibit lets unlikely artists shine



SUBMITTED PHOTO Art instructor Alison Horvitz, left, guides Lynne C. and Rita Cabral as they prepare pieces for "Art of Recovery: Expressing the Journey," an exhibit that opens March 8 at Greater Fall River Art Association, 80 Belmont St.

By **Debra Ryan**

Fall River Spirit Correspondent

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People working to improve their mental health have found a new outlet for their creativity and, perhaps, a new way to heal.

In "Art of Recovery: Expressing the Journey," a new exhibit at Greater Fall River Art Association, 80 Belmont St., their efforts will be on display for all to see. The exhibit, which opens March 8 and runs through the end of the month, features work by artists who participate in a program run by Fellowship Health Resources.

Therese Bernier, rehabilitation and recovery group coordinator, has been working for 17 years with people who have chronic mental illness.

"We have an art program called Studio 35 that meets three days a week," Bernier said. "We found that art works wonders for the clients. It relaxes them and gives them a reprieve from whatever symptoms they have."

The program, funded by a United Way grant, helps people with mental illness to channel their emotions through art, music, dance, writing, horticulture and other activities.

"After seeing a notice in the newspaper for an art show, for the UMass Dartmouth Art Group, we brought the clients to see the show," Bernier said. "We met artist Alison Horvitz who offered to hold a workshop for us."

For two hours, every Friday for six weeks, six clients attended the workshop. Their artwork will be on display and for sale at the March 8 art show, 4-7 p.m., and all month.

"They were a responsive group," Horvitz said. "It was a new technique, something they had never done before, but you could tell they really loved doing it."

Working at Horvitz's studio at 1 West St. in Fall River, the group painted on glass.

"I call it print-making without a press," Horvitz said. "The group was very enthusiastic. They can't wait to see their work hanging up."

Bernier said the socialization is "wonderful" for her clients.

"Some who tend to be on the quiet side are able to express their feelings through their artwork. It brings tears to my eyes to watch them encourage each other," Bernier said.

After serving in the U.S. Navy, Bernier began working with the special needs population as a recovery support worker 17 years ago.

"Each person has a unique quality," she said. "I love what I do. We overlook the mental illness and look for that spark inside of them and we find it. Sometimes it is challenging and sometimes they have been stereotyped. I believe we are planting seeds. We may not see those seeds bloom, but someone else will."

Bernier said Fellowship Health Resources serves 100 clients.

"We make sure they are taking their medications and teach them life skills such as cleaning and cooking," she said. "We like to keep people in their communities. More than half have their own apartments."

Bernier said the organization is seeing a rise in drug use.

"People are uneducated about the problem. We need to teach children at an early age not to cover up what they are going through by using drugs," Bernier said. "There is always something we can do."

Bernier said she has seen a huge cutback in funding for mental health programs.

"People can help by donating their time or (donating) things such as art supplies, yarn, books, or gift cards," she said. "Our mission statement includes a culture of hope, respect, ethical behavior, and genuine caring for our clients. We invest in the individual and never lose hope in the potential for their personal growth and the recovery of each person."