

**...No man can sincerely try to help another without helping himself...  
serve and thou shall be served. Emerson**

**By Betsy Varian**

In June 2011, I was free. Retirement offered me lots of free time and many opportunities. After 40 years of working in the business world as well as being of service to the public as a social worker and special ed teacher, I envisioned life at my fitness club, enjoying leisurely lunches with my spouse or a friend, and going back to school for literature and writing classes (my goal an M.A. in English).

Life was almost perfect; still something was missing. I wasn't sure what I was seeking until an old friend told me about Laurel House in Stamford.

Laurel House is a community-based resource center that provides adults with mental illness the opportunity to recover. This is accomplished through support that helps them to further their education, find employment and housing, while offering opportunities for creative expression. Until then, I had not known of any organization in Fairfield County that provided these services. I was intrigued.

My friend asked me if I would consider running a writers' workshop at Laurel House. Something just felt right when I visited with clients, staff, and other volunteers. I knew immediately that I wanted to be a part of this team, using my social work and teaching skills to help people with mental illness recover and reintegrate into the community. So, in July 2012, I embarked on a new career as a volunteer.

Over the past few months, I have gotten to know my student writers quite well. In this warm, accepting setting, they have shared their lives, loves, fears, and hopes with me. Workshop participants have opened up and written beautiful pieces that have taught and touched us all. The writers' workshop as well as the other services provided by Laurel House can be significant change agents. Program participants gain insight and a more positive feeling about themselves in order to re-enter the workforce and community with hope and confidence.

I have also had the opportunity to help mentor a graduate student client currently in a social services master's program. And, not only has this exercise refreshed and sharpened my interest in psychology and social issues, but I have had the satisfaction of helping to develop a "future social worker" who will ultimately work in the community to address and ameliorate problems such as depression, homelessness and addiction.

Without the efforts of the team of professionals and volunteers at Laurel House, his career could not be launched. Clearly, this social worker in-the-making has benefitted, but I too have been enriched by the experience. In addition, my eyes have been opened through the personal connections of staff and clients to new perspective on human creativity, potential and resilience.

Laurel House clients often struggle against formidable odds to recovery. The result of their perseverance and hard work is a sense of real accomplishment and growing optimism for a happier future.

I have been a volunteer for six months now, performing a job that is both challenging and gratifying. I am proud to be a member of the Laurel

House team helping our program participants discover their inner-strength and learn new coping skills. I love being a facilitator and listener. As a writers' workshop leader, I provide an encouraging and supportive environment to enhance the spiritual and emotional life of us all. Most of all, I am truly thankful for the opportunity to use all my skills for the betterment of others. I know that in this new phase of my life, I am making meaningful and enduring contributions to Laurel House and the community at large.

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