



Art Therapy – An Update

Linda Plamondon, Art Therapist

What do you do with a thousand donated buttons? Make commemorative bracelets, of course! January, 2009 found the art therapy programs at both Maria Shelter and the Vincennes Senior Center celebrating the inauguration of President Barack Obama. Bracelets were created out of memory wire and the many buttons received in donations; three beads of red, white, and blue added a finishing touch to the uniquely designed jewelry-making project (Photo right).



The commemorative presidential flag completed by the Seniors in November was officially hung on Election Day 2008 at the center (Photo-left). At the bottom of the flag is written "This flag was created to commemorate the moment in history when the first black male - Senator Barack Obama - ran for United States President. It was designed and sewn throughout the summer of 2008." Participants then signed their names along with the date of this historical moment. The flag was dedicated and blessed in December at the annual holiday concert.

Sewing continues to be a popular activity with both the Vincennes Seniors and Maria Shelter residents, including the assembly of quilts for grandbabies (photo-right). Our most recent project consists of sewing "recession aprons." Based on a simple apron pattern—similar to the ones our grandmothers wore--, these aprons are constructed out of plain cotton muslin, scraps of fabrics—and are, of course— embellished with buttons!



Deborah Benford Presents International Conference *Gwen Fowler – Maria Shelter*

On February 25, 2009 our own Deborah Benford (case manager/ Maria Shelter) flew from Chicago to Valladolid, Yucatan in Mexico. Deborah was presenting along with several renowned educators and community leaders from around the world. Her paper, "Walking Wounded Women", which addresses the plight of homeless women and children living in Chicago, was chosen from literally thousands of applications.

Deborah noted, in Valladolid, which is a small town there was no word for homeless. The people there could not relate to the term. "While there is poverty, extreme poverty and people begging on the street at the end of the day they went home to some type of housing", Deborah explained.

The conference brought together community and business leaders, educators and administrators from a variety of public, private and not for profit settings. Their objectives were to address social issues, local and global economies as they relate to education and poverty. The group also focused on the value and practice of indigenous wisdoms in program development and design.

Deborah has an advanced degree in Adult Education and uses her expertise in this area when working with the residents of Maria Shelter. Education and information are huge areas of importance for her. She knows that when women are educated around pertinent and critical issues they make better more informed choices for themselves. We are indeed fortunate to have a woman like Deborah who brings her unique skills and talents in service to the agency and the women and children of Maria Shelter on a day-to-day basis.

IWT Celebrates 35 Years - Strong history, bright future

Gerri Kerger – IWT Development Director



Thirty five years ago, Sister Margaret Traxler, SSND and a group of interfaith women started the Institute of Women Today to advocate on issues important to women and children. How did we get to where we are? It began with a very special woman, Margaret Ellen Traxler, born 85 years ago on March 12. Margaret was born to a physician father and a nurse mother in tiny Henderson, Minnesota. She was raised in a loving family, where she grew up watching her father tend to the medical needs of the small community and experienced a childhood centered upon her faith and family.

Margaret entered the School Sisters of Notre Dame in 1941. It is not surprising that Margaret chose to attend St. Catherine's college, a woman's college that provided not only a formal education, but also promoted that strong sense of social justice and feminism that became Margaret's hallmark. Margaret taught school for many years, but eventually came to the Chicago area where her passion for advocacy continued to flourish. Whether marching with Dr. King in Alabama, working to improve Christian-Judeo relationships (for which she received the prestigious Golda Meier award), or her effort to resolve "the troubles" in Northern Ireland, Margaret always spoke up for those who had no voice.

Central focus of Margaret's advocacy, was women's issues. When domestic violence was not acknowledged, Margaret and her friends routinely visited the women's prison in Dwight, working to resolve legal issues for women often unjustly imprisoned. She brought others with her, including several brilliant attorneys who advocated on behalf of the women. She also brought counselors who helped her develop a job training program. Quite often, she brought something that helped lift the women's spirits and strengthen their resolve to improve their lives—she brought their children.

Margaret and her group of loyal volunteers became the Institute of Women Today, and when they decided they wanted to expand their services by opening a shelter, Cardinal Bernardin, who so ardently believed in Margaret's work, offered the St. Carthage Parish property to her. The day the doors of Maria Shelter opened, Margaret was shocked that the first woman to arrive on the doorstep was a young woman, 9 months pregnant! Not only did Margaret offer her shelter, but she allowed her to return to the shelter after giving birth, which was almost unheard of at the time. Can you imagine losing your job, your home, and then losing your children because of it?

In 2000, Margaret had a debilitating stroke and returned to her order's motherhouse in Mankato where she died two years later. The board, staff and volunteers came to the rescue writing grants, paying bills, and finding a new Executive Director. Sister Ruth Mutchler, RSM, the former principal of Mother McAuley High School, and director of St. Catherine's Residence in Milwaukee agreed to take on the formidable task of Executive Director. Under Sister Ruth's tenure a new telephone and computer system was implemented, new programs were developed, and relationships with the Sisters of Mercy, and many other individuals and groups from Chicago's south side were even further strengthened as more people began to recognize the good works that were being continued at IWT.

Currently, Maria Shelter serves over 200 women and children each year. A holistic approach Margaret began is still employed today. Each woman receives physical and mental assessments, works with a counselor and case manager, participates in programming ranging from music, art therapy, parenting classes, budgeting and financial management. In addition to Maria Shelter, IWT also operates the Vincennes Senior Center, where more than 100 seniors participate in educational programming, social activities, receive medical services and a hot lunch. Choir and Art Programs are collaborations between the seniors and the shelter residents. Phyllis White, Vincennes Senior Center Director, worked in administration of St. Carthage Parish and has operated the senior center since its inception. Each year she continues to find creative and interesting programs and activities to offer program participants.

35 years later, Margaret's legacy continues, despite obstacles, we follow Margaret's path of service and profound belief that each of us can make a difference. Celebrate Margaret's birth and our anniversary, we realize that she will forever remain in our heart and that her spirit lives on in the work that she began so long ago.

IWT Executive Director – Angela Hicks

As spring approaches I am often caught by the beauty and simplicity of spring's offerings. We probably haven't thought much about the life cycle of leaves on a tree. After a sometimes, long and bitter winter, the leaves show back up, as beautiful and as pristine as they ever were. In many aspects, our lives are not different than that of the trees and leaves that populate our world. The greatest difference I believe lies in their capacity for renewal.

We are people who have grown up immersed in the idea of contributing. We want to bring beauty to the world and into the lives of others. This capacity for many of us comes as a natural part of our being so like the trees and leaves we see on display, it is just who we are. It is just what we do. Unfortunately, unlike the leaves and trees we cannot predict the exact time of year when everything in our lives will be green and vibrant again. Our winters can sometimes overwhelm us.

The state of the economy has certainly brought "winter" for many of us including the women, children and senior citizens of the Institute of Women Today. I could break your heart over and over again with the reality of the lives of the people who walk through our doors. However, if I did that we could miss something truly amazing. It is the strength that lies within, the fortitude that makes one go on, the hope that allows us to envision beyond our situations, and the spirit that connects us one to another. That is what is truly exceptional about us, our ability to go within ourselves during difficult times and come out stronger than ever. We are able to do this because friends and supporters like you never give up on us. We are able to do this because of the spirit that connects us one to another.

This spring as we at IWT take time to nurture our spirits, we invite you to join us and do the same. So like the trees we will go inside to heal, strengthen and come out of our winter stronger and more beautiful than ever. The trees are indeed a wonder to behold, but they pale in comparison to the beauty you help to create within us.



"They loved me, till I loved myself"

Jocelyn Moore, Resident Assistant-Maria Shelter

I came to the Institute of Women Today's Maria Shelter in June 2005, thinking shelter was the only thing I needed at the time. When I arrived I was so thankful to have a place to go, at the time, I was working and needed somewhere I could have some stability. Maria Shelter gave me 120 days and a requirement, to set aside savings when I would be able to move. During my "intake it was also explained that case management, counseling, along with weekly groups were provided. That was all good, but I had a job and just needed shelter, not making much contact. It was a place to stay, food to eat, even clothing and putting away savings was a BIG PLUS. But I just didn't feel

right, wanting things to work over night. Inside I felt guilt, shame, self pity, hurt and anger, things that happen in our lives that may never be addressed with family or loved ones. I came here trusting Maria Shelter had a bed for me, not thinking about other areas of my life, although on a daily basis staff ask "How are you doing?" I finally had a conversation with Ms. Gwen, I talked, cried and laughed in one breath. CHANGE. I felt such relief and what was most important was that she was listening. We talked more often and she introduced me to someone who's been with me all my life, I was just afraid to get to know them., ME. Again CHANGE. My attitude began to change and I saw the benefits of case management. Ms. Benford was helpful in connecting me to housing programs, job training and whatever it takes to get you on your feet. CHANGE. Talk about change. To this day, I am in the same apartment I moved into from Maria Shelter. I have completed programs in nutrition, participated in art class, a program in domestic violence and budgeting. I remember when I walked through the doors of Maria Shelter, there's a sign "Where Change Begins" Well, my change began at Institute of Women Today. I have changed, I am not perfect, but I am a part-time employee at Maria Shelter and change, CHANGE IS GOOD. (**Congratulations to Jocelyn, completing certification with The Chicago Anti-Hunger Federation Training Institute, successfully completing Food Handling & Sanitation Certification Course, May 2, 2009)



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Wish List

Shelter and Senior Needs

1. Blankets, towels, sheets and pillows
2. Gift Certificates to Target
3. Toiletries
4. Diapers and formula
5. Socks and underwear
6. Art supplies
7. Rubbermaid storage containers
8. File Cabinets

For more information:
Please call 773-651-8372 or visit
www.instituteofwomentoday.org

SAVE THE DATE

Mark your calendars for
JULY 8th, 2009
To join us for our fundraising
event.

www.instituteofwomentoday.org

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