

Arts & Culture

January 22-28, 2009
editorial@boulderweekly.com

Art finds a home

Rising homeless population finds a way to express itself
by Dylan Otto Krider

Though never ideal, if you're going to be homeless, Boulder is about as good a place as any to be on the streets. There are numerous organizations around town that provide quality food and shelter to those who don't have a permanent roof over their heads.

However, that might not be the case for long. Recently, Boulder County experienced a sudden jump in the number of homeless citizens due to harsh economic times, and officials have been recruiting volunteers in an effort to get an accurate count of just how many homeless are in the Boulder area.

One of the facilities serving Boulder's homeless is the Carriage House, which provides showers, fills out prescriptions, offers counseling, helps people find jobs, and, now, provides art classes.



"A lot of people are afraid of or resistant to traditional types of therapy," says Carriage House's executive director, Joy Eckstine.

Some have been hospitalized against their will, which tends to make one wary of psychologists. "We're professional mental-health workers, and it's really important to build a relationship and get people involved."

By engaging in art, the Carriage House builds trust with their clients. One woman who became particularly engaged in the group came to realize she might be bipolar and agreed to start medication. The turning point was when Eckstine had to confront the woman concerning some unauthorized long-distance phone calls. Without that relationship in place, things might have gone differently.

The classes are run by local artist Susan Stephens — although "class" is probably not the right word.

"I didn't want to do classes, but just have the material there and encourage them to be creative," Stephens says.

Because homeless people tend to have unpredictable schedules, it's not realistic to expect consistent attendance, but she's gotten some regulars. The main objective is to provide them a place to work, and to have someone knowledgeable on hand who can guide them, should they be receptive to a tip.

Currently, Caffe Sole is hosting an exhibit of the artwork to raise funds. Half of the proceeds from sales will go to the artists, and the other half will go to the Carriage House.

Stephens says that these homeless citizens don't think of themselves as artistic, so she goes out of her way to frame and hang their work in a professional manner to give them a sense of accomplishment. Some of the pieces can appear to be unsophisticated, but the sense of pride that these artists get from seeing their work on display is tangible.

That's not to say there aren't some creative works on display. Stephens was particularly impressed by "Cat," a young woman in her 20s who does abstract designs.

“She has a lot of rage in her she’s trying to work out,” Stephens says.

Her pictures tend to be more conceptual, with unusual designs and a informal personal approach that allows the viewer to glimpse inside her head.

The stories of the artists behind the work are almost as varied as the styles. Some are war veterans, while others are retirees who lost their Social Security or young runaways who’ve fled bad homes. A large percentage are mentally ill or struggling with addiction, while others had head injuries or lost their houses when they were hit with unexpected medical bills.

The creative process is relaxing and provides a good atmosphere to be social. Many times, the participants just want human contact, and the relaxed setting allows them to open up and develop trust in the counselors.

“There’s a young man who has done the art group who used to be a heroine addict and moved out here to get away from drugs,” Eckstine says.

She has asked him to create the thank you cards they send to people who have donated to the Carriage House.

“He’s been working really, really hard to get a job. He has been doing the art group, the addiction group and work group. We’ve been teaching him to interview, and he’s been getting an interview once or twice a week.”

Part of the credit can go to Stephens’ class. “Art can be very therapeutic,” Eckstine says. And sometimes, it’s the only therapy people can get.

On the Bill:

Homeless Artists Display is currently on exhibit at Caffe Sole, 637 S Broadway St # R., 303-499-2985. For more information, visit www.caffesole.com or www.bouldercharriagehouse.org.

Respond: letters@boulderweekly.com