

Addicts explore themselves through writing

by Gina Conn

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Jeb Wallace-Brodeur / Staff Photo

Deb Fleischman and Gary Miller, co-leaders of the new Barre chapter of the support group, Writers For Recovery, pose at Bear Pond Books in Montpelier.

BARRE — Pat Murray, who has been sober from alcohol for three years now, said that writing about her addiction has helped her heal.

“It’s allowed me an outlet to express myself in a different way. It helps me get in touch with myself a little bit more,” she said.

Murray and other recovering addicts have been using the pen as a way to express their addiction through a writing workshop at a local outpatient center, and will share their work with the public in downtown Barre next week.

Author Gary Lee Miller and writing instructor Deb Fleischman have been teaching a 10-week course, Writers For Recovery, on Tuesdays from 6:30-8 p.m. at Barre’s Turning Point Center. About a dozen people, who range in age from 20 to 65 and who have been clean two months to 25 years, regularly attend the workshop.

“I’d say the most common response is that people who think they can’t write, turns out they can. They just need to have something to write about that matters to them,” said Bob Purvis, who runs Barre’s Turning Point Center, and also participated in the workshop. He himself is a recovering addict, sober since 2004. “I’ve never written much at all about my own recovery,” said Purvis. “I

thought it would be an interesting way to loosen me up and start talking about myself a little bit, something I don't usually do."

Writers For Recovery came about after Bess O'Brien's 2013 documentary film about opiate addiction, "The Hungry Heart." Miller said O'Brien wanted to give something back to people who had participated in the St. Albans documentary, as she realized they took a risk when they spoke about being a recovering addict on camera. She set up an eight-week arts workshop in the area, involving radio, black and white photography, theater and writing. Miller ran the writing segment.

From there, Miller started Writers For Recovery in Burlington in the summer of 2014, then got funding from the Department of Corrections to arrange more classes around Vermont. Now, the workshop is in Barre and St. Johnsbury at both a recovery center and a men's prison. Miller said there will soon be groups in Rutland and a men's prison in Newport.

"They're growing with their writing skills but they are also growing with their courage — talking about their addiction, about things that they've done that they're not proud of or events that were traumatic," said Miller of the attendees at the Barre Writers For Recovery.

Typically in the workshop, writers are given a prompt and seven minutes to write about it. Examples of prompts include: "What scares me the most," and "a morning I'm using, a morning in recovery."

Not all prompts are about addiction and people's potentially dark pasts. There are also light prompts and prompts that address writing form.

"It's not just a seven-minute piece of a paragraph. It's the beginning of something and often they go home and revisit and rework it," said Fleischman. "Some of these people are extraordinary writers."

The Barre group ends this week, but Purvis said he would like it to continue and will invest his time if there is interest. Miller said they are looking for funding.

Studio Place Arts will host readings by Writers For Recovery participants Wednesday evening from 6 to 8 p.m. Some will have their work read anonymously by other people. The event is open to the public. Their work can be read online at writersforrecovery.org/blog.