

Hope for Women program offers a path to a more secure future

Given the current state of the economy and the high rate of unemployment in the region, it is hard to image many feeling hopeful.

At the House of Peace & Education, informally known as HOPE, this is what a handful of women feel each month. For more than a decade, HOPE has offered a job training program to about 70 unemployed and underemployed women from Greater Gardner through a program called, HOPE for Women.

For women seeking to escape domestic violence, move from welfare to work, leave the ranks of the working poor, or overcome unexpected personal or family trauma, HOPE for Women offers a path to a more secure future. "The fact that women find their way to HOPE, despite the formidable circumstances facing them is amazing," says Mary Roth, HOPE for Women Program Director.

HOPE for Women offers a month long comprehensive individualized computer and job-skills training program which seeks to assist women in transition to their next step toward self-sufficiency, whether it is employment in a job with a living wage or continued education that will in turn lead to sustainable employment.

The program also seeks to help women begin to overcome



Courtesy photo

HOPE for Women graduate Cheryl Johnson shares her story with other women in the Hope for Women program.

the societal and internal barriers that have prevented them from succeeding so they can provide for themselves and their families adequately and with dignity. While the program has realized many successes, the current downturn in the economy has caused HOPE to re-evaluate the current design of the training.

"We have found one month of training is not sufficient to prepare women to return to work or school. In this current economy, we are looking to keep women

with us a little longer to ride out the storm," explains HOPE's Executive Director Joanne Foster. With a generous grant from the Francis H LeBlanc Charitable Trust, HOPE will pilot an expansion of the training program to 8 weeks and offer up to 200 hours of computer instruction and job and life skills training.

According to Margaret Donohue-Lynch, HOPE for Women Computer Instructor, the expanded program will allow

them to give each woman more time in computer instruction and enable her to move beyond the basics of Microsoft Office, Outlook and internet explorer, an essential skill for any women interested in office employment or returning to school.

As well, the pilot will offer two hours daily of job readiness and life skills training, including topics such as money management, resume and cover letter writing, career exploration and job search.

The essential structure of the program will remain unchanged, with small classes (teacher to student ratio of 1:5) which allows for a high degree of individual attention.

A boutique of donated business clothing offers graduates ensembles to attend interviews and start new jobs with confidence.

The goal is that women will acquire enough skills and confidence to be ready to return to school, extended training and ultimately to a job that pays self-sufficient wages.

The path from the HOPE for Women program to sustainable employment takes time and a great deal of support from many partners. "The key to the program's success is really the strong collaborations we share with other service providers and employers in the communi-

ty" states Ms. Foster. Many of the women who come from the HOPE for Women program enroll in programs at Mount Wachusett Community College. In fact, a site visit to the Mount is part of the training program.

Through collaboration with the Greater Gardner CDC, 2-3 women each month are invited to participate in month long internships in local businesses. The internship is viewed as an extension of the classroom, allowing graduates to practice what they learned.

It is also another opportunity to boost confidence. As recent HW graduate and intern Christina Wickberg explains, "The Hope for Women program was great for helping to build my self-esteem and the internship is not as much pressure as you would normally feel starting a new job"

In early March, Tina began a six-week internship with RCAP Solutions in their Gardner office. Upon completing her unpaid internship, Tina's was hired by RCAP to fill in for an employee on maternity leave in their Worcester office.

According to Tina, "the ultimate goal is to return to the Gardner office."

At the conclusion of each HOPE for Women class a graduation is held. This is an opportu-

nity to celebrate the accomplishment of completing the course, and to acknowledge the seemingly insurmountable obstacles that almost kept them from coming to HOPE.

In a small circle, the women, surrounded by family members, HOPE staff and board, share what the program has meant to them. A box of tissues is passed and there is usually not a dry eye in the room. At the conclusion of the ceremony, HOPE staff offer an open invitation to the women to return to HOPE, stating in unison: "Once a HOPE woman, always a HOPE woman." For some this means coming back to freshen up their skills when needed, for others, like Cheryl Johnson and her fellow graduates, it means paying it forward and making a contribution of time or money to HOPE. "We were overwhelmed, when during a recent graduation, this class of women handed us an envelope", says Ms. Roth. "Inside was over \$100 worth of gift cards for gas, and groceries. According to Ms. Johnson (see her story in the insert), "We wanted to give something back to HOPE, for the gift of hope they gave to all of us. I could never give back (to HOPE) what they have given to me. I wouldn't be where I am today and wouldn't have the confidence that I have if it weren't for HOPE."