



Santa Monica Daily Press

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THE CLEARING THE AIR ISSUE

Homelessness told through a camera lens

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VENICE Through the lens of a camera, Rebecca Curry re-lived what it was like to be homeless.

Armed with an SLR digital camera, the former client of OPCC's Daybreak recently ventured back to the streets to capture the memories of a dark two-year-period, taking a picture of her son's stuffed animals in their old room at the women's shelter and shooting the familiar sight of a man pushing a cart on Los Angeles Street.

"It gave me a chance to look back on being homeless ... and accept the direction that I was ready to go and move on to get myself housing," Curry said.

She is one of nine current and formerly homeless mentally-ill women who recently wrapped up a 12-week course on documentary photography at Venice Arts,

which, through a grant from the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, collaborated with Daybreak women's shelter on a pilot project that combines the arts with social services.

Their work will be on display starting Saturday going through Aug. 31 at the Venice Arts Gallery in an exhibit titled, "Got Caught Up Out There," telling the story of survival on the streets, whether it was urinating on themselves to be unappealing to men or riding endlessly on the bus to stay safe.

"In terms of really lifting up the voices of those who tend to be the most voiceless, lifting up their stories, we thought this would be a really wonderful opportunity," Lynn Warshafsky, the executive director of the nonprofit arts organization, said.

Some of the women, including Curry, came to the program with some photography background, whether it was through

school or a hobby they picked up. The course covered the technical aspects of digital photography, but primarily focused on using the medium to tell stories and empowering themselves in the process.

There was insecurity on the part of some women as to whether they had the ability to learn to use the cameras and related equipment. Others wondered whether they could effectively communicate accounts of being homeless, Amy Turk, the director of Daybreak, said.

"In the end they felt this sense of pride in terms of being able to learn how to use the cameras, how to scan pictures and use computers and see the power in their story through art," she said. "The group became cohesive too and they provided a lot of support to each other as they told their story."

Curry was homeless for roughly two

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Photo courtesy Emily Jacobson

CANDID MOMENT: A woman at OPCC's Daybreak Shelter in Santa Monica passing time.

Venice Arts exhibit allows homeless women tell stories

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years, forced out of her apartment after she could no longer pay rent. She spent about 10 months at Daybreak and finally moved into an apartment in Los Angeles in June.

She decided to take the photography class to fill up some free time she had during the day.

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Rebecca Curry
former OPCC Daybreak client

"They showed me that I took the right way out to get help instead of just living on the street," Curry said about the experience.

Maya Myers, a professional photographer who served as a mentor for the program, described the initial challenge of gaining the trust of the students, assuring that they would not exploit them.

She was able to do so by simply treating the women like they were human beings, as equals.

While much of the class involved going out in the field, there were days when the women would just sit in class and discuss how they felt about homelessness in society.

"I think that was when they saw we wanted to hear what they said and respected who they were," Myers said.

The women in the program are at different stages in their transition out of homelessness. Some are recently sheltered, others are still on the streets. A few women have moved into transitional housing and at least one has enrolled in a photography class at Santa Monica College.

"I think (the program) validated their experiences," Turk said. "Being able to tell it through art helped them feel more proud about where they have been and where they are going."

The learning experiences weren't limited to the students.

For Myers it was the first time working with homeless women after having helped at-risk youth with various arts organizations for three years.

"I think one of the things that really affected me is exactly how sensitive and vulnerable these women were because of the idea of being homeless and how society sees them," she said. "They are just extremely protective of themselves in every sense of the word."

"It completely opened up my world."

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