

Many people emerge from mental hospitals with no place to go except home, living in sheltered nuclei of loneliness, surrounded by activity. But the chance to learn new life skills, to be employed, to absorb a positive atmosphere, and share strawberry shortcake awaits all at the...

Harmony House

By MIKE LEE
Of the Emerald

"You really get a different feeling once you're here involved with people — it's a real positive kind of atmosphere," says Mary Alice Brown. "I think that's something you just can't pick up talking over the phone."

Brown is the director of Harmony House, whose clientele is ex-mental hospital patients. She says that the House serves up to 25 people a day.

"It's primarily a day center, socialization and treatment," says Brown. "When we first started it was just an opportunity to get people outside of their homes. Now it's more in terms of an activity: we introduce them to things they might not have been involved in before, teaching them life skills like cooking."

In the kitchen, five people are making strawberry shortcake. One puts down what he is doing to greet the visitor with an outstretched hand.

"Hi, my name is Richard," he says. Speaking with a slight slur, he proceeds to the living room to show the guest an intricate spaceship drawing he is working on. A staffer walks in and pries Richard off the guest, sending Richard back to the kitchen.

Looking at the empty room, the staffer apologizes. "There are usually a lot more people here," he explains, "but since it's the first of the month they get paid today. They're all out spending their checks somewhere."

"Work has become a really important part of our program," says Brown. "What we do is contract with people in the community. We also have a contract with Lane County to do work: landscape work, janitorial work, window washing and lawn work."

Workers get paid minimum wage after the job is done — in cash. It's not as simple for the House itself. According to Brown, Harmony House receives funds



Photo by Greg Gawlowski

from United Way, city-county revenue sharing, and some patients' Medicaid. Although it's a non-profit corporation, contributions are not tax-deductible — yet. "We're working on that," Brown says.

Incorporated in 1972, the House originally occupied space in Lincoln School, then moved around to "wherever we could find some free space," according to Brown. It settled into its present Garden Avenue location in 1974.

"We've been able to serve a lot more people and a lot of different kinds of people" over the years. At one point we were serving a lot of males ages 20 to 30 — now we've really expanded that."

The group in the kitchen illustrates her point. One lady cutting strawberries is in her late fifties. Richard is 19. The conversation is light, the staffers maintaining an interest in what the clients say. Richard is carrying on an animated, one-sided conversation with the visitor.

"If you'd stop talking so much you could cut more strawberries," someone tells him.

"We shop for the foods we prepare for lunch on the same day," says Brown. They go to a regular grocery store "so the people get a feeling for what it's like."

Other such "transferable skills" are taught in classes including swimming, yoga, basketball, art, field trips to movies, and disco dancing.

"Maxine only dances the slow ones," says someone referring to the older lady.

"My feet stick to the carpet if I dance any faster," she retorts.

People "come here to be with other people, to expand their interests," explains Brown. If Harmony House didn't exist "they'd probably either spend more time in their houses not going out at all or hang out on the mall. It would depend on their lifestyles — most of them were living in one-room quads."

Brown adds, "It's less likely that they would be working. Most of the people here are on welfare supplemented by work arranged by Harmony House."

Six of the staff workers are funded by CETA grants, she says. Above that they have ten volunteers.

With the cake in the oven and the table cleared off, the group adjourns to the living room. As the visitor leaves, a voice rings out through the doorway.

"Are you sure you don't want to take a picture of my rocket?"

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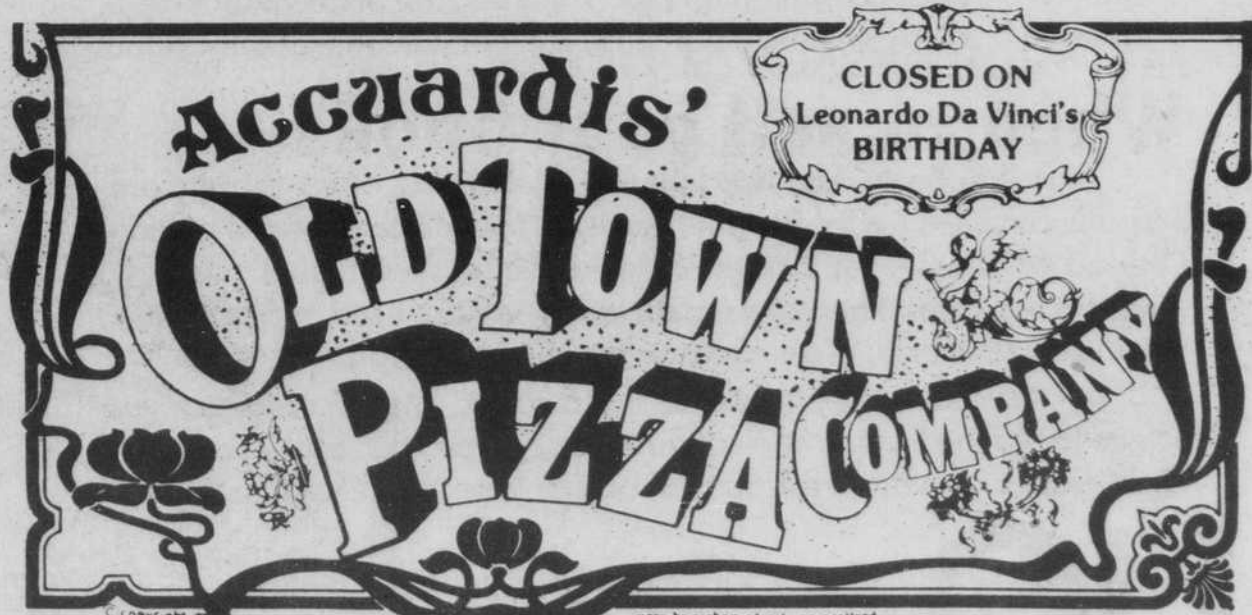
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