

Center helps disabled return to society

By Frale de Guzman
Of the Emerald

People with psychiatric disabilities sometimes need help integrating into the community. The Laurel Hill Center is one place to turn.

"Having an illness, whether it's physical or mental is difficult," says Mary Alice Brown, executive director of the Laurel Hill Center. Located at 2621 Augusta St., the center is a non-profit organization that teaches Lane County residents with psychiatric disabilities the skills needed to function independently in the community. After spending time in a hospital removed from the community, people lose touch, Brown says. When an individual returns, "it's like coming back to the community and starting all over again," she says.

Formerly known as Community Services of Lane County, the 14-year-old program is staffed by professionals and University interns from the University Community Action Program. Student interns commit themselves for nine months and work 12 hours a week in addition to attending one-hour seminars twice a week.

Interns receive 12 practicum credit hours per term and can receive an additional two credits by attending a three-day preservice workshop held before fall registration.

The hands-on experience prepares students for human service roles, says Anita Runyan, director of the University program.

"It's a tremendous learning experience and growth," says intern Lisbeth Gilbert, a human development and performance major.

Participation in the program has made her see the disadvantages faced by the center's residents, she says. "They lack the skills needed to be in-

tegrated into the mainstream of society," Gilbert says.

But Carol Melia, a food service trainer-evaluator, says. "Mental illness does not need to be a handicap. It's only what you believe in yourself that is the handicap.

"I don't care how depressed somebody is," she says, "if you have a dream in mind, there is nothing to stop you."

The center currently handles about 150 clients a month, with lengths of stay ranging from several months to several years.

"It's really the staff that makes the difference," Brown says. Participants are "motivated to work hard when they have a good relationship with someone.

"It takes a special relationship to encourage people to keep trying even though it's uncomfortable," she adds.

"Everyone makes progress," Brown says. But "not everyone grows as fast. We start to work with people where they are when they come in."

The center's programs include the Social/Harmony House, which develops social interaction skills, and the Independent Living Program, which teaches skills needed to live independently.

For example, Brown says, "Individuals who have severe psychiatric problems have a really small amount of money to live on. If you only have \$200 a month and that's supposed to cover rent, food and everything, you don't have much margin for error. So we help them budget their dollars."

The Supervised Work Experience & Employment Program (SWEEP) prepares individuals for the job market.

"I try to model an interaction in an office," says Linda Osak, trainer-evaluator of the Data Entry/Word Processing Program. "They (participants) treat it like

a job, and I treat them like employees," she says.

"This is a real opportunity for me to get a real valuable job skill," says Linda Couch, a participant in the program.

Student positions include Independent Living assistant, Senior and Rural Outreach Program assistant and Socialization Program assistant.

The center is funded by the state Vocational Rehabilitation Division and Mental Health, SWEEP business contracts, Oregon Project Independence, the United Way of Lane County and the Joint Social Service Fund.



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