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South Lane Mental Health cements positive message in stone

By Caitlyn May
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CAITLYN MAY/COTTAGE GROVE SENTINEL

ROCKS—Completed rocks sit in a basket outside Deb Blackston's office at SLMH.

While May is Mental Health Awareness Month, South Lane Mental Health provides mental health services and support all year long and this year, they're ensuring that the messages of positivity and persistence carry forward to June and the year beyond by, quite literally, writing them in stone.

Art therapist and South Lane Mental Health counselor Deb Blackstone is an ideas person and when she was contemplating how to South Lane Menthal Health could engage with Mental Health Awareness Month, she had one: Painted rocks.

The hobby has been reported in states around the country and consists of a variety of rules, standards and practices but remains constant in its premise, which is to paint rocks and leave them in areas for people to find.

And while painted rocks have popped up in and around Cottage Grove, landing them on Facebook pages and other social media outlets, South Lane Mental Health is more interested in the process than the product.

"It's more about spreading that positive energy and positive affirmation," Blackstone said.

Before the rocks could be painted and labeled with those positive messages however, they had to be collected.

"I just went to Boyce and Sons and they have a crate of river rocks," Blackstone said. "I carried the bucket up to them and asked how much for the river rocks and they found it what it was for and they just donated them."

Once she had the rocks, Blackstone said it was easy to get the rest of the staff on boardfor her pared down version of the project that was originally supposed to include clients and community members as well.

She made the rocks available to staff and created art kits complete with paint, brushes and color wheels to accompany them. Soon, she noticed counselors taking them into sessions with clients and the crate outside her office to collect finished rocks began to fill.

Group painting sessions for staff were planned and during the last week in May, South Lane Mental Health planned for pairs of staffers to go out into the community armed with the rocks stamped with "SLMH 2018."

They placed them in parks, along Main Street, at schools and other public places. They aren't asking those who find the rocks to give them back or adhere to the rules of some rock painting efforts that require finders to then paint rocks and hide them in return.

Instead, South Lane Mental Health would rather the message be received and, if the finder is so inclined, to share a photo of the rock on the organization's Facebook page.

It's all part of drawing attention to mental health and the services available to community members beyond the month of May, which has been designated Mental Health Awareness Month since 1949. According to the CDC, nearly 54 million Americans have been affected by a mental health disorder. A large percentage of those individuals do not seek help or are unaware of the services available to them.

"There's a saying about this I saw on Facebook," Blackstone said. "It's not about finding the prettiest rock or painting the nicest rock. It's about spreading random acts of kindness."

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