

# THE HARTFORD COURANT

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GROWING STRONGER PROGRAM CULTIVATES PEOPLE WHILE CARING FOR SHRUBS, YARDS

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Caption: PHOTO 1: LYNN WHITE, right, and Michaella DelCiampo weed a flower garden outside a downtown Willimantic outpatient recovery center. White runs Growing Stronger, a program that enlists women recently released from jail and recovering addicts, like DelCiampo, to help elderly residents with their yardwork.

PHOTO 2: LYNN WHITE, right, visits Carrie Smith, 89, who gets help with her yardwork through White's Growing Stronger program.

Illustration: PHOTO 1: color, SHANA SURECK / THE HARTFORD COURANT

PHOTO 2: (B&W), SHANA SURECK / THE HARTFORD COURANT

The older woman had already said goodbye to a lot of favorite activities, and she was loath to add gardening to the list. For years, she'd found comfort in her lush landscape, but as her health deteriorated, her yard went to seed.

While she balked at saying goodbye, the younger woman, who was fighting a substance addiction, was looking for a way to learn a skill and fill her days. In short, she wanted to say hello to something.

They met in the garden in Willimantic, under the auspices of Growing Stronger Inc., a locally run mentoring and service program that takes young women who are in recovery or fresh out of jail and trains them in the art of landscaping and gardening in the overgrown gardens of women unable to manage on their own because of age or illness.

The program is the brainchild of Lynn White, a mother of four who runs Abundant Life Community Church in Willimantic with her husband, Kevin. As her children grew - ages 25, 23, 17 and 10; she calls it "marathon mothering" - White was looking for part-time work that would combine her love of landscaping with the needs of two disparate communities - the recovery one, and the aging one.

Years ago, White earned a degree in environmental horticulture/landscape design at the University of Connecticut, and before having children, she worked as a landscaping crew boss. A member of the Windham Garden Club, she organized an after-school landscape program for ninth-graders and worked with Eastern State Connecticut University students and others to plant flowering cherry trees along a Willimantic street.

Rose Fowler, executive director at McSweeney Regional Senior Center, is a fan.

"It's one of the frustrations of being a senior," said Fowler. "They don't have the ability to go out and take care of their gardens. I thought that was a good thing to offer, and the fact that she would be training younger women to garden and help people was a win-win situation."

So far, it's been that. White visited local agencies asking for women who were in recovery or on probation and who wanted to work. As it turns out, the young participants aren't the only ones learning. White has schooled herself in computers, grant-writing and how to organize a nonprofit.

She's learned from older clients, too. White hadn't worked with people who are HIV-positive until one client, who had isolated herself in her home, signed on. As the woman's yard took shape, White said the woman "began to not only come and sit outside and look at the new plants, she started telling us her story." She began to eat better, too.

"I have learned the phrase 'loving up on people' from my friends from the South," said White. "I love that phrase. I'm just loving up on people."

## BRANCHING OUT

Last year, the program's third, they finished 13 projects, including planting annuals at the Windham Textile and History Museum and improving a small garden at the town hall to make room for a metal sculpture of a frog sitting on a spool.

White, who grew up in Meriden, was first led into the garden by her father. He died when she was still in college, and that set her on a religious search. One weekend, she read her Good News Bible for the first time. Back at school, she started stacking the Bible on top of her textbooks to see if she would meet other seekers. She fell in with a group of what she laughingly calls Jesus freaks - it was the '70s - among whom was her future husband, with whom she recently celebrated their evangelical church's 20th anniversary.

White is considering expanding Growing Stronger into other fields, like plumbing. She's getting more comfortable with grant-writing (asking for money is never fun), and she's about to return to a few corporations that require a nonprofit to operate for a few years' experience before they consider donations.

Several of her trainees have moved on to jobs with a local landscaping company. Several more have moved from recovery houses - substance-free residences they enter after rehab - to their own apartments.

Michaela DelCiampo, 27, was in a recovery house when she met White last year. It was early in her sobriety (she's been clean since March 16, 2007), and, unable to work, she thought gardening would be a good way to keep busy.

"It gives people a lot, to make things aesthetically appealing," said DelCiampo. Recently, she and White met at town hall to plant pink geraniums around a dogwood tree planted in memory of a former garden club president. All the while, White gave DelCiampo tips on plant roots.

DelCiampo worked for a while at a local landscaping company, but she had some health issues and had to leave. She's not done, though. She was a year and a half shy of a college degree before drugs got in the way. Shortly, she will be returning to college. As she tells the story, White stands by, beaming.

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