

Healing Garden joins first-of-its-kind prison outreach

BY CARLENE PHILLIPS · NOVEMBER 16, 2017

As we walked toward the three-story brick building, I felt a twinge of apprehension. Others in my small group had been here three weeks before, but this would be my first time inside a prison of any kind. South Middlesex Correctional Center (SMCC) in Framingham is a minimum-security, prerelease facility for women who have been sent there from MCI, the medium-security prison across the street, where they may have spent sentences of weeks, months, or years. From emails among the group of us earlier in the week, I knew that the others had been cleared to bring certain materials in with them. I wondered if I would be allowed to keep my pen and pad of paper. And I wondered what the women would be like.



At the Virginia Thurston Healing Garden, executive director Margaret Koch (left) and arts therapist Marcia Lewin-Berlin flank a tree hung with wind blessings made by the women at South Middlesex Correctional Center. (Photo by Lisa Aciukewicz)

On the car ride in from Harvard, Margaret Koch, executive director of the Virginia Thurston Healing Garden on Bolton Road, who had invited me along on this visit, told me a bit about how she had gotten involved with SMCC. Out of the blue, Tanya, a correctional program officer at SMCC, had called her to ask if the Healing Garden would like to do a program with the SMCC inmates in October, breast cancer awareness month. Tanya explained that two years before, the

facility had begun working with many of the women who had expressed a desire to let the public know they are people of value. A way to show this would be to donate to a charity as a way of giving back to society. Many of the women have a job in the community, and the money is banked for them at different facilities for when they are released. (The SMCC website says they earn \$7 a day.) They are allowed to donate a limited amount of their money to charity. But they had been unable to decide on a recipient. Tanya, who had been a client at the Healing Garden several years ago, talked to the inmates about how much the Healing Garden had done for her when she was undergoing treatment. She described the setting, the therapies, and especially its uniqueness in having a support group for young patients like her. The women agreed that they would like the Healing Garden to be the charity to which they would donate money.

So, three weeks ago, Koch, along with Nadine and Marcia, two arts therapists who do work at the Healing Garden, had done a program with the SMCC women. It was the first time any outside organization had been invited into the center to interact with the women. Today they were back to do a second program and to receive the money the women had collected.

Checking in

Now, in the lobby of SMCC, we turned in our driver's licenses to a man behind a grille (we had already stowed our pocketbooks in the car), and we were given visitor passes on lanyards. A uniformed officer checked off the other women's materials and flipped through my pad of paper. On the ride in, Nadine had said she didn't like referring to the women as "inmates"—she thought it dehumanized them—and there seemed to be a tacit agreement among us in the car that we would not refer to them as such. But now, being "processed" for a visit, I had a fleeting thought that "inmate" was, in fact, what the women were. Deputy Superintendent Lynn Licotte greeted us, saying how excited she was to have the Healing Garden back for this unique connection. Tanya was there, also, as shift commander, her uniform tempered by a pink streak in her hair allowed for the occasion.

We were taken downstairs to a room with stationary seats at long tables. "It doesn't look like a prison, does it?" Licotte asked rhetorically. "We call it a dorm. The women are a lot like you and me, but they made a bad mistake." We were asked to put our coats up at the front of the room, presumably out of reach. Licotte remarked again how this kind of

interaction had never been done in a prison before. She said how pleased she had been with the first program with the Healing Garden and how she looked forward to this day's events. "It brings [the women] together for a cause outside themselves," Licotte said.

Soon women began to file in, sitting at the tables so as to face front. Some of them looked as though they were in their 20s, and a few looked 60 or older. There seemed a sameness to them, and a seriousness, even somberness. None of them had a smile or seemed to be talking with each other.

Dogs for veterans

I was surprised to see that a few of the women had a dog on a leash, large dogs that looked mostly Lab. I was sitting at a table a bit off to the side, with six or seven young people who said they were from Spectrum. I found out later that Spectrum is a state agency that hires people to run discussion groups and a variety of classes at the prison. I asked the young man across from me about the dogs, and he said the women were part of a training program for dogs to be adopted by veterans.

With no more women arriving and a roomful of about 50, Koch started the program, introducing the Healing Garden to those women who had not participated in the previous meeting. I knew that last time, the women had made Tibetan flags, or wind blessings, with artwork and written messages on them. Koch had taken those back to Harvard, and clients at the Healing Garden chose one that resonated with them. Today, Koch showed a video in which five or six cancer clients responded to the wind blessing they had chosen and thanked the women for creating them. "What you did here last time was a gift," Koch told the women. The rows of women in front of me were rapt with attention as they watched the reactions to the messages they had sent. One client said that the words, "Don't give up. Right before you want to quit, a miracle happens," had given her new courage. "Keep swimming," read another message, surrounded by colorful fish. "Thank you for making this," said the client to the camera. Another client held her flag with "Love Yourself" written inside a heart.

The film ended by showing the colorful flags hanging in different places throughout the gardens. I was moved by the expressions of the women in front of me as I watched their connectedness to the women at the Healing Garden. "Your intentions have fused with the elements and gone out into the universe of energy," Koch told the women. There was stirring in the room as some of the women turned a bit to look at one another.

Connecting to the energy

The first activity was led by an energy healer who also runs programs at the Healing Garden. She had us all stand, and she led us in a grounding activity, having us connect to the energy of the earth up to a higher power, "whatever that may be for

you," she said. She suggested that this might be a helpful exercise for the women to do each day. She had a series of crystal and metal bowls, which she rubbed or struck and explained how different tones excite responses from us. "Sounds send intentions into the universe," she said. She suggested we close our eyes as she played the bowls and chanted.

Torn between my roles as reporter and participant, I kept looking at three young women sitting in the front corner of the room. They were looking at each other a lot, and though they weren't literally rolling their eyes, I sensed their cynicism. As the session went on, and the women struck and passed a small bowl among themselves, I noticed one of the trio had turned around to the front, and all three of them had their eyes closed. As the sounds of the bowls faded away, the women were visibly more relaxed. Asked for their responses to the sound meditation, the women called out words like "peace," "unity," "tranquility." One of the trio at the front said, "The bowls were cool."

Next, Nadine led the women in an arts therapy exercise, making a mandala. "Circles are everywhere," she said. "A mandala is a circle of unity into which we put our intentions." She put paper and colored pencils on all the tables. The staff members were absorbed in the activity and as I looked around, I saw the women interacting with one another over their art; a lot of them were smiling and talking.

At the end, we all—Spectrum staff, officers, the women, dogs, and we from the Healing Garden—stood in a large circle around the mandalas that had been spread out on the floor on the other side of the room. One of the women took paper squares from a manila envelope and spread them around the periphery of the mandalas, explaining later that these were bookmarks the women had made for clients at the Healing Garden. Asked to give some responses to making the mandalas, voices joined in: "Trust, focus, peace, serenity, relaxing, shine like a diamond, beauty, diversity, community."

Koch told the women how much she appreciated them "for being so present and real with us." Licotte announced that the women had a check to give to the Healing Garden and produced a large cardboard "check" in the amount of \$305. Licotte had the women pass the "check" around the circle, saying, "This is from all of us." Koch accepted it, saying how much it meant to the cancer clients to have this connection with the women at SMCC. "Thank you for helping us keep them afloat," she said to the women. The staff also gave a donation to the Healing Garden in a separate envelope. Licotte praised the staff for its role in making the connection happen.

In closing, Marcia shared with the women something we had talked about in the car driving in. "You are not just one thing. You are everything that you are. This time here does not define you," she told the women. In the same way, the message at the Healing Garden to its clients is that "cancer" cannot define them.