



## NEWS

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**Art Empowers Mental Health  
Residential Services Consumer**

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Unity House consumer Cathy Langworthy  
with one of her displayed pieces

**AUBURN** – For Port Byron, NY native Cathy Langworthy, a consumer of Unity House of Cayuga County Inc.’s Supervised Community Residential Housing mental health program and services in Auburn, NY, art is more than just a creative impulse that produces tangible objects that appeal to one’s senses. To her,

it also is an important reminder of a talent worthy of nurturing as well as an essential part of her capacity to cope with and overcome the challenges mental health illnesses often present.

“I think I’ve always had an artistic ability,” smiled Langworthy, whose intelligence and focused manner belie traits characteristic of artistic personalities. “It was just after high school that I really noticed it, especially my orientation to detail, which really came through with the ink sketching I did then and still do. Although that impulse to create comes and goes with me, when it’s there I like to honor it and follow it and work at my art. I’m pretty sure, too, that doing that is affirming and combined with the other help I get, it probably plays some role in my steady progress.”

Langworthy, who joined Supervised Community Residential Housing in March 2006, has tentative plans to move in December of this year to Unity House’s Independent Housing program and services, a logical next step and appropriate level of care and support for her. There’s little

doubt her artistic inclinations will accompany her regardless of her residential and occupational situations.

“I guess my art career if you can call it that started at age 16, when I undertook cake decorating,” remarked Langworthy, who’s earned an Associate’s Degree in criminal justice from Cayuga Community College in Auburn and a Social Services Competency Board Training (SSCBT) certification through NY State Empire College while employed at Head Start. “I went so far with that work as to make a complete record player turntable cake. It was fun and let me create. From there I also designed and made pretty detailed gingerbread houses that I tried to move at retail, but couldn’t because the price I would have had to charge to cover the time and materials that went into making them was too prohibitive to profit. Live and learn. I have to say cake decorating was an important part of maintaining my artistic abilities. I also just kept at sketching and drawing pretty much in line with whenever the appeal to do so was there.”

Langworthy also counts “regular, very structured” art classes that didn’t especially work for her, and running a novelty business that included a stint as a balloon-selling clown while traveling with a carnival, as events over time that helped maintain her faithfulness to her artistic impulse. That desire was continued and evolved further upon her enrollment in supervised housing and her participation in one of its chief components, the Intensive Psychiatric Rehabilitation Program (IPRT).

“I was taking an art class in IPRT and liking it when I also heard about another art program that Susan Sloan, IPRT’s director, suggested,” said Langworthy. “My community therapist helped refer me to it, and the program informed me by letter that I was accepted.”

The art program Langworthy and 11 other Auburn consumers who also expressed an interest in art were referred to ran over a seven week period this past summer and was the result

of a Welch Allyn Foundation grant awarded to the Cayuga County chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). That organization's overseer, Terri Wasilenko, authored the grant request which was awarded funding to cover the cost of the program's art supplies and materials.

"The whole genesis for the program was with our effort to obtain a grant from the Peer Group Network," Wasilenko said. "They helped steer us to the Allyn Foundation which awarded the funding to do this program."

Wasilenko enlisted the help of community mental health therapists Linda Sillars (also a Nurse Practitioner) and Rhonda Stanford-Zahn, both life-long painters who were instrumental in developing the syllabus of the Cayuga County NAMI-sponsored Experiential Art Program and who also volunteered to facilitate it. All three also collaborated to find a home for the program at the Schweinfurth Memorial Art Center in Auburn.

"Cathy was part of a very focused group of artists who were just awesome," said Sillars, who works for the Cayuga County Department of Mental Health. "Rhonda and I made sure each week of the program incorporated therapeutic elements as well as the production of art. In developing the syllabus together we learned we complemented each other. Therapeutically, the classes helped break down the isolation many with mental health illnesses experience and at the same time they also encouraged socialization. Of course, in producing art everyone in the classes could identify with something other than their mental illness or illnesses."

"The experience was phenomenal," agreed Zahn, who added that the syllabus included art and other goals, art and self-reflection, self-portraits and how we see ourselves as well as how we think others see us, colors and mood, free-form painting and spontaneity versus planning, and mixed media-affirmation and the power of visualization and positive thinking. "The basis of the

program was about empowerment and thoughtful processing, not the finished product. It also encouraged our artists to be faithful to their urge to put their brushes to canvas.”

Langworthy said the program “gave her focus” and was the catalyst for the production of three acrylic pieces that are now framed and displayed at Unity House’s Cayuga County administration lobby at the Case Mansion at 108 South Street in Auburn.

“I’ve labeled one The Waterfall, one The Sunset, and one Affirmations,” she beamed as she showed her program art recently. “As paintings they take more effort for me, whereas sketching as I’ve said takes more time because sketching is more detailed. Water is really present in all three works because of my relationship to water growing up. It’s an important part of my life experience so far.”

Sillars said Langworthy’s participation in the program was instrumental to its success. She also praised her artistic abilities.

“Cathy’s commitment to the program and her art and what she shared really contributed to a worthy experience for all of us,” she said. “She’s prolific and very involved in her work and has a very unique way of painting that addresses emotional challenges, too. She builds her work differently and has a unique way of developing images, too.”

Wasilenko, Sillars, and Zahn said they would like to see the Experiential Art Program extended as part of an ongoing commitment to the community and consumers like Langworthy. To them – and Langworthy – art and wellness are strongly associated.

“It’s fulfilling and makes sense,” said Langworthy. “I look at it for me as an avocation but an important one that helps me with perspective and all those challenges depression and the like can present. I’m grateful for the art program I finished and for Linda and Rhonda. Focus is all important to staying on the task at hand and that’s a big part of what art does for me.”