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## Jane Levitt of Belmont gives to Rosie's Place

When Belmont resident Jane Levitt met Newton resident Patty Simon, their introduction developed into a close friendship of 31 years, as both women became mothers of three children who also became best friends.

One of their common bonds is the commitment to volunteer their time, talents and resources to others.

Rosie's Place in Boston is both a temporary shelter and extensive resource for women facing hardships. Almost 15 years ago, Levitt heard there was a need for volunteers to launch an arts program, and she asked Simon, an artist, to volunteer with her. Through art, 15 to 20 women expressed their inner thoughts. For nine years, Levitt and Simon guided women to show their story in a safe, nonjudgmental space.

"Rosie's Place depends on volunteers for all its programs. We're particularly blessed in the arts program by Jane and Patty, who wonderfully share their time and creativity," said Alev Danis of London, who became the director of the Arts Initiative in 2006. "In the arts program, I felt there was an opportunity for volunteers to share their energy, creativity and empathy in a very direct way. A two-hour weekly workshop over many years allows a very real bond of respect."

Five years ago, Levitt and Simon transitioned from art to a creative writing program. Using prompts such as a postcard, they encouraged the women to write what they see and write what they know. A core group of five to six women shows up weekly, and the program is their consistent channel to feed their need for expression.

"These women support each other, worry about each other, care deeply for each other as they share their work. It is a privilege to witness their stories. The room bonds them, and I am grateful they feel safe. There is trust. They are my teachers," said Levitt. "I gain insights from their life experiences."

When Simon, who is from Houston and Dallas, moved to Boston in 1986, she knew she wanted to use her talent in art to help people, especially the homeless.

"I was curious about who are the homeless, and to understand their story. I felt they did not have a voice and were invisible to some," Simon said. "Rosie's is comfortable, and I love connecting to people in an authentic, deep way. Creative writing does that," said Simon.

Over the years, through writing and art, Levitt and Simon have provided creative outlets for women to connect to their past, present and future. The women also bond in a special way to each other. The women refer to Levitt and Simon, who as peers also participate in the writing process, as "Laverne & Shirley."

"Their soul comes out in the writing," Simon said.

"Women range in age and the writing varies from a memoir, to a journal entries to writing a book. To change it up a bit, we conducted a writing retreat at Habitat on a spring day" said Levitt.

"It is great healing for our guests and we are about to publish a book. The writing is a catharsis as the women push through some profound backgrounds. The writing is supremely healing for women. One guest said after a six-month depression, she felt much more confident and secure," said Danis. "Jane and Patty have both shown extraordinary commitment to the creative writing group, and a great enjoyment in creating a very safe and welcoming environment for our guests to share their very personal and often painful memories. That all sounds very serious, and yet, there is much laughter in the workshops as well."

Levitt, who is originally from Kansas City, grew up in a family who practiced the importance of giving back. At the University of Oregon, she volunteered for the Mobility International USA organization. When she moved to Boston, her work involved supporting low-income and senior citizen housing arts programs and health services. She currently volunteers at the Elizabeth Evarts de Rham Hospice Home in Cambridge, mentors at the Global Connections Program at Berklee College of Music and does outreach for the Karam Foundation for Syrian Refugees. She served several years on boards for Habitat Intergenerational Program and the Foundation for Belmont Education.

Simon donates time and resources to the Karam Foundation, an organization that develops education programs to refugee youth, aid to Syrian families and sustainable development projects.

"The refugees are another piece of homelessness," said Simon.

Another organization Simon invests her efforts is Shining Hope for Communities (SHOFCO), which fights gender inequality and extreme poverty in urban slums. Simon focuses on Kibera, the largest slum in Africa, three miles from Nairobi, Kenya. She also volunteers at The Second Step in Newton, which provides transitional housing and other services for survivors of domestic abuse.



Jane Levitt (right) discusses a piece written by a participant in the creative writing group that she co-leads with Patty Simon (not pictured) at Rosie's Place in Roxbury as (from left) Florence P. Norma S. and Beverly L. listen April 19. Levitt was honored as volunteer of the month. Wicked Local Staff Photo/ Sam Goresch