

# South End *News*

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## Bringing Music Therapy To Rosies

Every year, thousands of women walk through the doors of Rosie's Place. Jeannie Greeley is one of them — though her reasons are slightly different.

BY SCOTT KEARNAN

Rosie's Place was founded in 1974 as the country's first shelter dedicated to poor and homeless women, and every day women seek refuge inside its walls; they come for warm meals, a safe bed, and access to advocacy. Greeley, on the other hand, is one of many volunteers who lend the time and passion to make that advocacy a reality. The South End resident is a multimedia producer at Berklee College of Music and a freelance writer, and she brings her skills to the Women's Education Center at Rosie's Place,



Jeannie Greeley

a fully volunteer-staffed program that connects women to English literacy courses. Her students, many immigrants, come from a multitude of cultural backgrounds, and some are not literate in even their native language. Yet with time and compassionate attention, says Greeley, they come to build confidence and adopt skills that will empower them in

future education and employment.

"The community that builds among these women is a beautiful thing to see," says Greeley, who is also a recognizable face in Boston's LGBT community. "Sometimes the changes are subtle, and sometimes they're grand. I've seen students go

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# Rosie's

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from great difficulty writing the letters of the alphabet, to reading a full page out of a book at 70 years old.”

Everyone looks forward to seeing Greeley “ride up on her bike” to the Harrison Avenue doors of Rosie’s Place, says Sara Jorgensen, director of the Women’s Education Center. She’s the type to “go the extra mile” (not to mention wickedly “funny”) and represents the best in volunteers who are crucial to the success of the organization; she has supported Rosie’s Place’s partnership with Berklee for a music therapy initiative, and Greeley even directed a \$1000 gift from Capital One’s Wish for Others campaign to Rosie’s Place. After all, Rosie’s Place is entirely supported by private individuals, corporations and foundations. By not accepting government funding, it frees itself from being held to some of the mandates attached to public dollars. That autonomy is important to initiatives like the Women’s Education Center (WEC), says Jorgensen, which is concerned with providing opportunity regardless of outcome. “Ours is a place of compassion, safety and unconditional love,” says Jorgensen. “We invest in everyone without requirement. Even for those who may not make outcomes, we give them the dignity of allowing them to study and do their best to achieve their goals.”

Rosie’s Place also invests in its volunteers, providing them with classroom training and a foundational curriculum for their work. But

of a grocery store, or working with the women to prepare for the WEC’s inaugural Writing Café, held over the winter, where they shared with each other weeks’ worth of journaling on myriad topics of personal importance.

Especially in today’s fractured and contentious political climate, Greeley wishes the stories these women share could be heard by many more outside the walls of Rosie’s Place. “These women show up week after week, half an hour early, coming from all over Massachusetts and maybe taking three forms of public transportation to get here,” says Greeley. “They are committed to their self-improvement. And so I cringe when I hear people who have no interaction with immigrant communities painting them with a broad brush. I see people of all ages coming here to try and better themselves and improve their life. That represents the immigrant experience to me.”

And though she’s logged hundreds of teaching hours over the last couple years, the most instructive experience, says Greeley, has been her own. “I think it has made me a more empathetic person,” she says, when asked how volunteering has most positively impacted her. “Boston has become a more unlivable city for a large population; look at the juxtapositions of extreme wealth and extreme poverty in the South End. As I’ve been teaching here I’ve been looking for new housing myself. When I think what a financial challenge it is for me, a middle-class white woman, it puts in perspective how it must be for these women and their families.”



the most valuable tools a volunteer can have are a sense of commitment, sincerity, and a little levity-imbuing humor, says Greeley. Those are her priorities, whether she's helping students learn to read food labels and understand pricing during a classroom recreation

Maybe the most important lesson isn't for her students, but for those fortunate enough to not be in the classroom. "People think it feels so far away, but all it can take is one significant thing to happen in your life, and you may need support too."