

Changing Lives Through Shared Stories

By Jan Steinbauer

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We learn through both our head and our heart. We learn through experiences—our own and, if a vicarious experience is true and powerful enough, through another person's experience shared via the written or spoken word. We learn, and our behavior changes.

Last fall, in workshops over two days, Mary Childers, a PhD in English now working at Dartmouth College, spoke with women and staff of nine Chittenden County social service organizations about her experiences growing up in poverty. In the preceding weeks, the 188 women struggling to rise out of poverty who

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words of one woman, "I loved the book. I connected with it emotionally and mentally. It made me want to go back to work, (which I did). It made me re-think how I grew up and how I felt about my mother."

Childers spoke frankly about the shortcomings of "the system," but also emphasized the need for individuals

to make difficult, and sometimes painful, personal choices that better their lives—not only about specific behaviors, but about values and priorities. Mary Childers's comments and her life experiences resonated with her audience in powerful ways. Said one thirty-two-year-old homeless mother, "Thank you SO much. This is the high point of my life, you have no idea."

The group was, as one participant observed, "a very diverse group of poor people", including young mothers, ex-offenders, developmentally challenged women and English Language Learners from Iraq and Somalia. One participant, Meghan, was homeless and pregnant, with her third child born later the same evening that Mary came to speak! The program had an "amazing influence" on Meghan's life, making a real difference to her in tangible ways. She found a place to live and developed a good network of support in Burlington, including friendships with other mothers that grew out of the program from their book discussions and the deep sharing of their experiences and lives.

A series of VPR interviews with Meghan can be heard at www.VPR.net.

The Vermont Humanities Council received a \$2,500 grant from the Women's Fund in 2008 in support of this program, and has been awarded an additional \$5,000 in 2009 for continuation of this work. For more information on Humanities Council programs, contact Jan Steinbauer at (802) 262-2626 x310.