ELK RAPIDS
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New Horizon members Janie Goodwin and Tracy Clark work on Christmas crafts during evening social time. Courtesy Photo

A harvest of hope

BY BARB MOSHER,
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New Horizons Clubhouse staff and members pause the workday for a group photo. Courtesy photo

During Jeff Helferich's eight years as a Mess Management Specialist in the United States Navy, he helped prepare holiday dinners (and daily meals year-round) for 6,500 grateful aircraft carrier personnel. Since leaving the military in 1995, he's used his culinary skills to bless a much smaller but equally appreciative crew: the members and staff of New Horizons Clubhouse (NHC) in Rapid City.

"It was quite a downsizing," Helferich joked of the transition. "But even though the military is family, it's even more family-oriented here."

Helferich's role as a psychosocial rehabilitation specialist with North Country Community Mental Health includes working five days a week with Clubhouse members who are interested in gaining hands-on kitchen expertise they can use at home or in a future job opportunity. It's just part of the mission of NHC, a day program that since 1994 has provided a safe and supportive community for adults recovering from mental illness.

"There's a lot of stigma around mental illness," said Clubhouse Director Lynn Hershberger. "We're a voluntary program that gives people who are living with a diagnosed mental illness a place and a sense of community. We get referrals from Community Mental Health caseworkers, but when (the client) walks through the door, to us they are just people like all of us."

Christine Pion, a Clubhouse rehab specialist, agrees. "I don't necessarily know their diagnosis. We focus on their strengths and talents. It's a safe community, a place to belong."

New Horizons Clubhouse is accredited by Clubhouse International and follows its model of providing "a collaborative, restorative environment where members can recover by gaining access to opportunities for employment, socialization, education, skill development, housing and improved wellness." Committed to the belief that every individual has something valuable to contribute to society, the program's goal is to help Clubhouse members "build self-confidence and end the social and economic isolation so often associated with mental illness."

New Horizons opens its doors from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday and on major holidays, with lunch prepared and served from its commercial-grade kitchen. Just as membership is voluntary, participation in daily activities and social outings is up to each individual.

Those who choose to do so can help in the culinary arts unit (including menu planning, shopping for groceries, managing inventory, preparing and serving meals, washing dishes, and operating the snack bar) and/or the business and communications unit responsible for Clubhouse administrative tasks (answering the phone, filing, paying bills, creating newsletters and social media updates, computer data entry, managing the social activities program, and other basic cleaning and organizational needs).

"There's a strong sense of purpose here," Pion said. "The staff can't run the Clubhouse by ourselves. We work side by side with the members. Members come in and get into a routine and eventually become support for other members."

"That's the secret of Clubhouse," Hershberger added. "We're building relationships with each other. We depend on members to get a lot of tasks done. We're like talent scouts. I want to see what their talents and strengths are and give them opportunities to use and develop them."

New Horizons was the 15th Michigan Clubhouse accredited through Clubhouse International and serves Medicaid-qualified CMH clients in Antrim, Kalkaska, and Otsego Counties. It's also accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities.

Since opening its doors, more than 400 persons with mental illness have benefitted as registered members. There are currently 42 active members, with about a third coming in on any given day. They're encouraged to take advantage of program offerings including assistance with transportation and achieving goals related to housing, education, employment, wellness, and access to medical and psychiatric services.

The Clubhouse has a food pantry, a washer and dryer, a shower, and computers for use by members. In addition to the daily routines and services offered at the Clubhouse, special activities offer recreational and social opportunities including bowling, hiking, shopping, movies, picnics, restaurant meals, and day trips to area attractions. Members also contribute to the community by volunteering with the Northwest Food Coalition and the state's Adopt-a-Highway program,

COVER STORY continued on page 2

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New Horizons staff Jeff Helferich and member Steven Sherman prepare lunch in the Culinary Arts Unit. Courtesy photo

cleaning up a three-mile stretch of US-31 three times a year.

The Clubhouse's transitional employment program (TEP) offers supported placement in entry-level jobs with area businesses. Clubhouse staff train each employee and oversee his or her progress. At the conclusion of the designated time (usually six to nine months), the employee may be offered a permanent job or may move on to different employment opportunities while a new member is selected to fill the position.

Jack C. (not his real name) is a former Clubhouse member who joined when he was 18. His family wanted him to apply for Supplemental Security Income, but with the encouragement of Clubhouse staff and a successful TEP experience at a laundromat, his self-confidence grew along with his skill set and a desire to work full time. He's now in his late 20s and the assistant manager of a gas station/convenience store.

Janie Goodwin has been a regular Clubhouse member for three years and in July accompanied staff member Eric Buechel to a two-week comprehensive Clubhouse International training in South Carolina focused on ways to improve Clubhouse functions and efficiency. If New House is open, Goodwin is usually present and engaged in contributing to its purposes: answering the phone, giving tours, helping with clerical work, and making phone calls to check on fellow members who may be isolating.

Goodwin insists she gets as much, if not more, from the Clubhouse as she gives. "I absolutely love it," she said. "I have great relationships with staff and members. They help me with transportation to appointments. And I just helped another member who couldn't get in to see an eye doctor until April. I made some phone calls and found one who would take her in January. She told me that I did more for her than her caseworker. I enjoyed that."

Finances are the Medicaid-funded program's biggest challenge, along with the limited transportation options available to clients in the largely rural service area. But the New Horizons staff are wholehearted in their desire to reach as many individuals as possible who need a place to actively participate in their mental health recovery by exploring their strengths, developing their talents, and establishing supportive relationships.

"I think (Clubhouse) is essential," Pion said. "It's proactive and can be life-saving. When someone is isolating at home, they can spiral down further and further. Here they participate and socialize with friends, and it really makes a difference. One in four people will struggle with some kind of mental health issue. But everyone has value and something to offer. People just need the right environment to bring those out. Just feeling like someone believes in you and has your back can make all the difference in the world."

For more information about New Horizons Clubhouse, call 231-331-4821 or email at *newhorizonsclubhouse@yahoo.com*.

New Horizons Director, Lynn Hershberger, and psychosocial rehab specialist Christine Pion.

Photo by Barb Mosher