

the daily break

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In Nasheena Mitchell's journal, she writes about and illustrates her spiritual journey, which led her to divinity school at Regent University.

REDEMPTION THROUGH WRITING

WOMEN'S JOURNALING CLASS pulls them through addiction and homelessness, and helps lead them to change their lives.

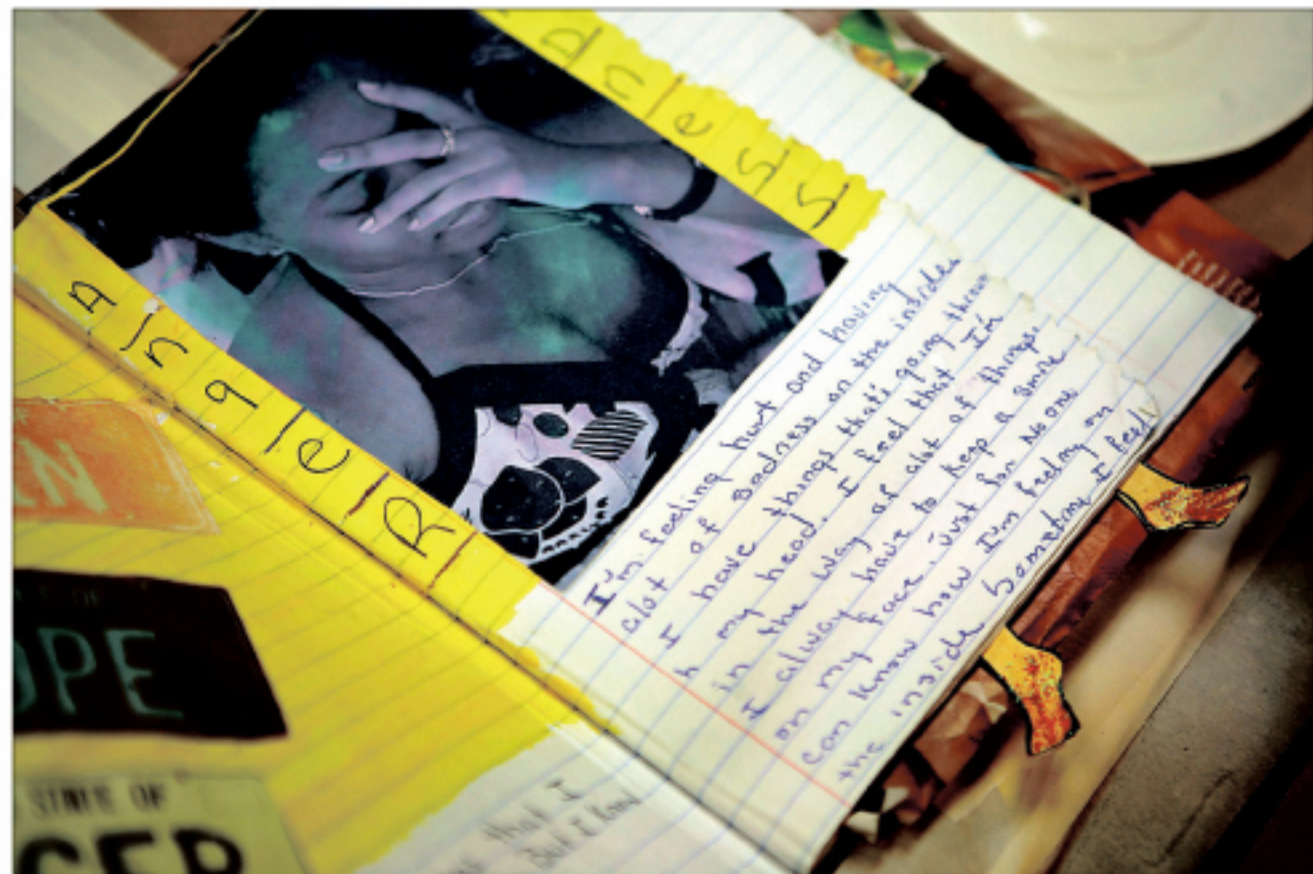
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The Virginian-Pilot

“They’re just blossoming. They’re realizing what gifts they do have, and coming alive.”

Beth Bender, artist

VIRGINIA BEACH
ADDICTION IS NO stranger to this room. Some of the women here will tell you readily about crippling loss – but only if you ask. For many, redemption is a goal. One night each week, about 10 women gather in this 10-by-14 cinder-block space to pour themselves into plain notebooks that become art. They meet in the Lighthouse Center, a small, nondescript building a few blocks from the Oceanfront that offers the homeless an address and phone number. Over the colder months, the building houses a shelter program, busing dozens of people each night to a church where they’ll get a mat, a space and a hot meal. That program has ended for the year, but the class on journaling continues. Most of the women who attend are homeless. Others started coming when they were homeless and still trek back each week. In the center of a table, on top of thick brown paper, are the tools they use – supplies many adults haven’t seen in decades. There are beads, glitter, a variety of glues, brightly colored scissors, crayons, brushes and paints that look like they were abandoned by others after a spurt of enthusiasm.

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The journal of Diane Williams details her struggles with rage, prison, homelessness, and her addiction to crack, which she successfully fought in 2008. She has found housing and recently graduated from a day support program.

FROM THE COVER

At right, Julie Burks, left, gives Debbie Maloney a hug during a recent class. Below, Diane Williams looks at crosses to add to her journal.



HEALING THROUGH THEIR ART

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Debbie Maloney, who runs the Lighthouse Center and homeless shelter program, started the class last fall. She brought in artist Beth Bender to work with the women and show them different media. Bender said she doesn't really lead the group; she just watches as the women develop.

"They're just blossoming," Bender said. "They're realizing what gifts they do have, and coming alive."

On this night, the women are having a party. They've brought in store-brand soda, snacks and shiny decorations.

There's familiarity in the laughter and good-natured teasing. They've spent plenty of time together; at many of the churches, the women roomed together each night.

At the head of the table is Julie Burks. The 50-year-old has been in the shelter program for years and has fought addiction for decades.

In her teens it was speed, which she used and sold. Then there were the years of Jim Beam and water, sometimes a couple of fifths a night.

Sometimes, there are lapses; she is counting her sobriety in terms of days.

She hopes the substance abuse is behind her. She had high hopes of getting her GED this year, but sobriety is now her top goal.

Her journal is packed with hope. In the front of the book is ornate type spelling out "MOTHER" in an arc. It's a nod to her teenage son, John, whom she last saw seven years ago when his father moved away with him. She hopes to reconnect with John when he turns 18.

In the back of her journal, past a thick chunk of blank pages, is a poem about fathers, about laughing and smiling and helping. It's been a few years since she's had contact with her father, almost a decade since they've seen each other face to face.



While she holds up a page so the glue can dry, Tanya Weatherspoon peeks at Nasheana Mitchell's journal. The women's art journaling class, held once a week, includes women who are still homeless and others who return after they have found housing.

By the time she journals her way to that section, she hopes to be back in contact with him.

"You can't get back in touch if you're having relapses," she said.

But time is crucial. "I'm 50 years old. They're getting up in age, too."

Burks has been homeless off and on since 17, she said, after having difficulties with her stepmother. But last year brought a glimmer of possibility: Her stepmother wrote her a card over the holidays, which Burks displays on the inside of her journal.

Some women journal with images, while others depend more on words. Diane Williams, a quiet presence in the group, said she works through her issues by writing.

Early in her journal, there are big words: PAIN, HOPE, ANGER. And there are images: a cross, a mother, a child.

The words reflect her past,

she said, which is filled with drugs, homelessness and rage. Rage, she said, that landed her in prison for five years for malicious wounding. She got out in 2008, the same year she broke her 13-year addiction to crack.

Williams, known to friends as Sugar Bear, said she looks forward to starting anew. She recently graduated from day support, a daily program that has helped her stay clean and deal with depression. She has found housing.

In her journal, she fills pages with neat lettering — her way of dealing with her issues.

She's known addiction all her life; she and her 10 siblings grew up watching their mom drink. She's lost two infants to SIDS.

In one exercise, the women wrote a single word to describe each other. Unable to make out the handwriting, Sugar Bear asked, "What's that word?"

"Courageous," Bender said.

Sugar Bear looked stunned. "This card says what people see, so I guess I better start believing it," she said.

Not all of the women are working through addictions. Nasheana Mitchell, 27, journals about her spiritual journey.

She had been a master's student in architectural engineering at Penn State University when she said God showed her her path and the timeframe: the seminary, and now. She quit school and packed up her car.

She hadn't yet applied to Regent University when she drove to Virginia Beach in July. She worked various jobs to raise the money to apply to the school's master's in divinity program, living out of her car until she got in an accident, then staying on the porch of an Oceanfront church, then the shelter for the first few months of school.

"I'm just grateful that the

Lord has stuck with me and done pretty much what he said he would do," she said.

Now a full-time student, Mitchell was able to get enough financial aid to pay for a place to live. But she, too, continues to attend the art classes.

She works prolifically, in both art and words.

Her artwork, among the class's most elaborate, is layered with glitter and horizontal and vertical lines. She likes the glitter because it represents bringing light to darkness, she said. The lines are crosses in abstract; the horizontal lines show relationships with people around us, while the vertical lines show the relationship with God.

On some pages, you'll find butterflies. On others, words.

"It symbolizes transformation in my life, and redemption," she said. "The writing helps you heal."

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Nasheana Mitchell