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Forty years, and still listening

Counseling Center nears anniversary, plans 'relaunch'

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On a recent, windy, brisk November afternoon, the sky above Clifton Avenue was already turning a blackish blue, fading into an early darkness. As leaves blew around overhead, the street took on an ominous feel.

But inside the Marblehead Counseling Center, with its cream-colored walls, apple-scented candles and brightly lit halls, the feeling was anything but dark.

Tucked away from the street, the Counseling Center resides in an old, three-story house. But the MCC, which has also been around for some time, has a new look and a new feel as it prepares to celebrate its 40th anniversary in June.

"We've taken about six months to kind of look at ourselves and say, OK, we've been offering a lot of services over the years," said Executive Director Paul Crosby. "Although we've been here a long time, there are a lot of people who don't know that we're here. It's not until they need the services that they go looking around."

The center is relaunching in an effort to raise awareness about its services, and perhaps expand into neighboring Swampscott.

Crosby, a man with a grey moustache and a big smile, is a veteran of the organization, and has been heavily involved in MCC's renewal. He talked spiritedly about the non-profit's mission. Seated in an office of mismatched, antique-looking furniture, he spoke about each therapist's office as a place of healing. The counselors are told to make their rooms more personal by adding things that might mean something to them. Those are the personal touches that Crosby said makes the Counseling Center a little more unique and a little bit more comforting to those seeking help, like for Marblehead resident David Antin, a long-time client of the center.

Twelve years ago, Antin's issues threatened to consume him. He was struggling with a drug addiction, his marriage was in trouble, and he des-

perately needed somewhere to turn. One day, he opened the yellow pages and found the listing for the Counseling Center, and within a short time, he was seeing a therapist regularly.

"The Counseling Center has helped me truly transform my life," Antin said. "I've changed my outlook on myself."

Antin credits the Center with helping him quit his drug addiction. He also quit smoking about three years ago, and said he exercises regularly. Overall, he feels pretty healthy.

But what might be the biggest transformation for Antin is a renewed sense of self worth.

"I no longer have the self doubts that I used to have, or the low self-esteem. It's tremendous, it really is," he said.

His divorce now complete, Antin has custody of his two young sons. He takes the boys to the Counseling Center regularly to address their own issues. He said he views counseling as a method of "life maintenance," just as one would maintain a car, or their health. He said he would continue to see a therapist throughout his life.

Crosby said substance abusers like Antin are a small percentage of the organization's clientele.

"We've spread more into overall mental health, so the issues we see most are depression and anxiety," Crosby said. "In kids, we see a lot of ADHD or acting out behavioral things. We've been doing more couples therapy, too."

The Center also practices community mediation, as between a landlord and a tenant or customer and a business person, while also offering financial-outreach services for those seeking other types of help.

"They do effective work, and it's affordable," said Antin, who has struggled in the past making ends meet. The center operates on a sliding scale, aiming only to charge clients what they can afford.

Antin said that during his hardest times, the therapists at the MCC were always available. He said he finds people there, like Crosby, extremely "genuine."

"Paul's given me a call when he's had tickets to concerts, and he's given gift cards to my children," Antin said. "They think of the people they're helping outside of the office."

Crosby said that with the economy in a slump and the holiday season near, there will be more people under stress; he advised that therapy is always a good option for those in duress.

"The financial stress could lead to depression, and that could lead to marital conflict; stress in and of itself is a type of anxiety," he said. "We'll see more people needing financial assistance. That will be coming. Actually, we have a meeting scheduled for later this month to bring some resources together to talk about how we can look ahead and get a little bit of a headstart on what we know is going to hit us very soon."

Living in a place like Marblehead while being in financial or emotional turmoil can be particularly tough.

"When you look around and you see every vehicle is brand new and the harbor in the summertime with the boats out there and the houses, it is something to contend with if you're not part of that," Antin said. "The work that I've done in therapy has made me realize that it's more of a self-esteem issue, and I've moved past that. I assumed that these people have it all together, but I'm sure that's not true."

Antin, who is looking for a job and thinking about taking classes towards a counseling degree, said he is hopeful about his future.

As is Crosby about the Counseling Center's mission in the days ahead: to help those it services to guide, heal and grow.

"We are a community agency — we were founded by the people in the community, and we are very, very involved in community life here," Crosby said. "We see the need and say, 'We can do it.'"

For more information on the Marblehead Counseling Center, visit: www.marbleheadcounseling.org