

Project Return, flying solo: Full, feathered nests



"The Chirp Inn," left, by Tina Sommers; middle, Untitled by Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward and "Just Wing It," by father and daughter team, Tina and Rich Sommers.



"Water Fowl" by Westporter, Baxter Urist. Contributed photos.



Mora was a run-away trailing a history of difficulties behind her. Drug and alcohol abuse, mental health issues and gang involvement eventually lead to placement in a girl's treatment program through the Department of Children and Family services.

Mora is one of over 120 alumnae to "graduate" from a unique therapeutic program for teenage girls. Project Return, located in Westport, was created as a safe haven for young women who seek mental and emotional stability.

When I visited Project Return last month, I hesitated for a moment on the weather-worn porch of an old farmhouse. I wasn't sure I was in the right place. After a tentative knock, a friendly voice from the other side of the door called for me to enter.

As I stepped inside, I found myself in a cozy living room. Piles of magazines were spread on an end table and a backpack and coat had been thrown onto a worn looking armchair in a corner. I felt that I had entered a private home as opposed to a formal therapeutic center.

Executive director of Pro-



BY ALEXANDRA WILSON

ject Return, Susie Basler, believes her program is special because of the stark differences that set it apart from other treatment facilities.

I was invited to sit on a cushy couch next to Basler while she and other staff members enthusiastically described the Project Return program and their mission to salvage the lives of troubled adolescent girls.

It is this intimate atmosphere that sets the Project Return program apart from so many other therapeutic facilities.

"We are re-creating a home environment," said Basler. "We think our model is unique. Our goal is to help kids get healthy. Through a family model we create a home as opposed to a hospital."

Established in 1986, Project Return was created in response to what the local community felt was a pressing need for a safe haven that adolescent girls could go to in order to sort out the various emotional struggles in their lives.

Coming from residential homes as well as hospitals and other institutional facilities,

all of the girls that have come to Project Return seek peace of mind.

Mora is one of many girls whose life situation has been drastically altered by the program.

"God, this program changed my life," she says. "I walked in with a crazy attitude and the idea that I was going to take no prisoners, and I left with the knowledge that someone, in fact quite a few some ones, actually cared what I did with my life and loved me."

Participants of the program have suffered from various hardships that no one should ever hope to face. For some, difficulties might include external suffering such as domestic abuse or grief surrounding the loss of a parent; others are challenged by more internal struggles such as depression or an eating disorder.

"If you come here, life has fallen apart for you pretty badly," said Basler. "This is a place for kids who have had a really hard time."

Once accepted into the program, all of the girls are readily encouraged to become

a part of the Project Return family. A sense of normalcy and belonging are feelings that all staff members agree are crucial to giving a solid foundation and relief to the chaos and grief that has become the norm in many of the girls' lives.

"I came from such a horribly turbulent, violent, sick history and I just never really had any understanding of self worth or the motivation to change anything," said Mora. "When I left PR my life didn't magically become perfect. But I honestly think that the love I got from the women at PR actually helped me make it."

Birthday parties are celebrated, house vacations are planned, and a mandatory family dinner, prepared by one of the girls, is served each evening. Most of the girls attend public or private school on a regular basis and each is required to see a personal therapist outside of the Project Return home. A mandatory study hour is set-aside during the evening and twice a week the girls and staff convene for a house meeting.

Westport's annual Birdhouse Auction Stroll and reception



Many of the birdhouse artists, above, joined the annual Birdhouse Auction Stroll. From left: Mary Jane Sommers, Norma Lacasse, Gayle Caro, Tina Sommers and Linda Lacasse.



Artist and VIPs alike attended a reception held at Tiffany's of Westport. Among them from left: Jane Carlin, a member of the Board of Directors-Project Return, Mimi Van Deusen BOD-PR and co-chair of the Stroll, Susie Basler, director of Project Return, Manny and Rose Pattavina, birdhouse artists.