

"I may look like nothing is wrong with me; however, I have problems functioning. Show me compassion. Listen to me without judgment."

KATIE FEICK, 55



A photograph by Katie Feick

Images of recovery

Program gives people with problems an avenue of expression

By Alan Johnson
THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

For the mentally ill, the road to recovery is apt to be long, winding and full of potholes.

Yet, when a camera is given to someone in recovery, the road is interpreted in different ways — as shadows, buildings, family members and more.

The Center of Vocational Alternatives did just that — giving digital cameras to nine people in recovery from mental illnesses, substance abuse or other ailments — to document their paths back to mental health.

"It really empowers people to look at different influences in their lives," said Robin Hepler,

director of marketing for the North Side agency, which provides vocational habilitation to those with mental illnesses and other disabilities.

Katie Feick, Danny Shelton and Kelli Shoupe are three of the central Ohioans whose work is included in an exhibit being shown today through Aug. 28 in the Rhodes Tower, 30 E. Broad St.

The "Mental Health Recovery: Through Our Lens & Pen" display offers an example of a project for PhotoVoice, an international organization that uses photography to promote social change.

Like the individuals who created them, the photo essays

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From left: instructor Alysse Gafkjen with Danny Shelton, Katie Feick and Kelli Shoupe and their works

IMAGES

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by Feick, Shoupe and Shelton are strikingly different.

Feick, 55, of Worthington, has struggled on and off with a crippling mental illness for 35 years.

She has lost several jobs, threatened suicide dozens of times and been hospitalized 30 times.

In recovery and living with a friend, she works part time as a physical therapist at Riverside Methodist Hospital and serves as a mental-health advocate.

Two of the three Feick photographs show people in shadows. The third depicts stages of her illness — one dominated by paranoia, isolation and hospitalization; and the other balanced among work, reading, exercise and a 12-step recovery program.

"Mental illness is an unseen handicap," said Feick, describing a photo with her shadow between shadows of a wheelchair and a walker.

"My brain chemistry is imbalanced. I have a thought-and-mood disorder that interferes with my ability to function on a daily basis."

Shoupe — a native of Portland, Maine, who moved to Columbus a year ago — suffers from bipolar disorder, characterized by dramatic, often-incapacitating mood swings.

Her exhibit photo consists of an oval made up of more than a dozen pairs of hands clasped together.

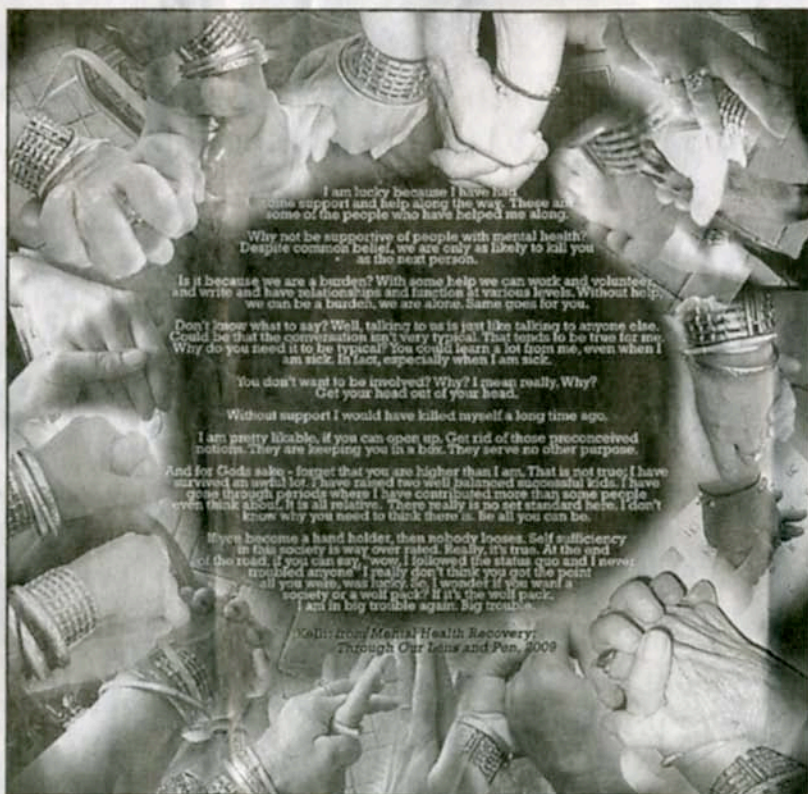
The hands, she said, are those of family, friends and others who helped during her recovery.

"Why not be supportive of people with mental health?" wrote Shoupe, 45. "With some help, we can work and volunteer and write and have relationships and function at various levels. Without help, we can be a burden; we are alone."

Shelton, a Columbus native, has



Images by Danny Shelton



A photo presentation by Kelli Shoupe

spent the past 20 years plagued by chronic depression and anxiety, living "on the edge of society."

Without a regular job, he slept in cars, in abandoned buildings and on the ground. And he served 18 months in prison.

"I started realizing I wasn't going to survive like that," said Shelton,

55. "I was homeless, helpless and hopeless."

After receiving treatment and therapy, he is beginning to turn his life around, he said.

He is enrolled at Columbus State Community College, working on a two-year degree in chemical-dependency counseling.

"Through the grace of God . . . and all the agencies that helped me along the way, I now have hope."

≡ DANNY SHELTON, 55

"I am lucky because I have had some support and help along the way."

≡ KELLI SHOUBE, 45

His photos show where he has been: an abandoned building, Faith Mission, an emergency-care center, the Center of Vocational Alternatives and Columbus State.

In the middle is a picture of Shelton and his four grandchildren, whom he is just getting to know after years of alienation.

The underlying message in every picture, according to the photographers, is dissolving the stigma, embarrassment and fear of disclosure that accompany mental illness.

"Stigma is not beneficial to others or to me. It serves no purpose," Shoupe said. "If you can't be supportive, at least don't be judgmental."

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