

Loves Herself Regardless

by Silja Kallenbach

I'm growing in love.

I love and accept myself as I am.

If I don't take care of myself I can't take care of others.

These affirmations help emotionally motivate and sustain women who are studying in the Adult Basic Education (ABE) program at Project Hope in Boston. Walking into their classroom I can tell right away this is no ordinary ABE class. At the center of the table around which the class is held is an elaborate centerpiece of candles, rocks, and flowers. Plants hang in windows, and on several side tables there are candles, more rocks, framed pictures, and inspirational quotes. The walls have been painted a cheerful peach color. It's a welcoming space. (See accompanying article, "Creating Sacred Space.")

The women who make up this class have made the often difficult decision to go back to school to get the GED. Some of them had positive experiences in school before dropping out. Lula Mae Johnson, for example, enjoyed learning

but left school some 40 years ago to raise her five children. Now, at the age of 65 she is pursuing the dream of her youth of becoming a lawyer. Other women, like Nadine Lovemore, had negative experiences in school: "I was always afraid because

when I was in high school the teachers never paid any attention if you weren't bright."

Regardless of how they felt about school in the past, all five women, who were interviewed for this article, started their studies at Project

Hope feeling worthless and lacking in self-confidence, at least when it comes to academic learning. "I used to feel ashamed of myself and stupid," says Stephanie Grell, who had to leave school at the age of 12 to take care of her siblings and "run the house." Lula Mae was taught always to put herself last. "I'd always find myself a corner to sit in because I was very embarrassed. I had very low self esteem," explains Lula. She and the other women were fortunate to find their way to Project Hope's ABE program where all students are automatically enrolled in a Loves Herself Regardless class, in addition to reading/writing, math, social studies, and health classes.

Loves Herself Regardless meets every Monday morning to help students get in a frame of mind that enables them to focus on their studies and to think positively. The purpose of this uncommon class is to help the learners, all of whom are women, to develop healthy self-esteem, to learn better ways of self-care, and to develop leadership skills. "Women of color or women who are marginalized have to go through a lot to get to the program. The Loves Herself class is an underpinning to help women continue to grow and transform while they are getting their education," explains Char Caver, the instructor extraordinaire of the class. It is Char who has turned the classroom into a kind of sanctuary. This is one of her many ways of communicating to the women that she cares about them, that they are deserving and beautiful. It has worked. Nadine exclaims, "It's so beautiful, it makes you feel you're somebody." The others nod their heads.

The Loves Herself Regardless class was

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originally developed by the Women's Theological Center in 1998, and it has evolved under Char's leadership over the past five years. A typical class may start with a "brain dump" where each student symbolically dumps whatever is bothering or worrying her in order to open herself to learning. Every class includes reflective journal writing, often in response to a prompt. "Free writing feels really good. It's relaxing. There's no right or wrong. I love writing now," says Shirley Fernandez. Later in the class they might make collages on themes like relationships, anger, or body image. Or, they might help each other identify self-defeating thoughts and behaviors, and how to replace them with positive ones. The class also helps students clarify their academic and life goals. Nadine comments, "It's a good class to break the ice. Students come with multiple problems. We learn to recognize each other as individuals, to give each other support and room for growth. This class has opened my mind to learning."

Sometimes students receive special gifts that become woven into the class goals. Rather than just handing out beautiful, new chenille blankets that someone had donated, Char had the women write about how they would use them for comfort and self-care. Char also runs the Loves Herself "store" where students can exchange weekly attendance awards for items related to self-care and growth. The enthusiasm that the five women express for the Loves Herself class stems from the positive effect the class has had on them. Sheena, who is new to the class, says it helps her focus throughout the day. Shirley says it helps her take care of herself, and to make time for school, in the midst of caring for her three children. Lula says she now allows herself to make her own education the number one priority. Nadine can't say enough about the class and its impact on her life: "When I started here I was on a path to self-destruction. When somebody said something (negative) to me I was ready to go off the deep end. Now I know better. I've learned not to take things so personally. I've

learned how to communicate. I know how to listen to people. I've learned how to just be with myself, how to evaluate myself and my strengths. I feel people always judge me, but I've learned that I can tell that person, 'You make me feel uncomfortable,' without getting into a fight about it. That's what I'm teaching my son to do.

"I've gotten a second chance to be the person I was supposed to be. I get to realize that deep down inside there is a good person. I used to say negative things about myself. I even thought about suicide at one point. I'm still in transition. I'm 33 years old, and I've never been so proud of myself in my life than I am now.

You have to develop strength. I've developed that strength. I know now that if I apply that strength to my life I'll be doing good."

A team of students from a doctoral counseling program at Boston College noted in 2002 that, "After observing the [Loves Herself Regardless] class for several months, there were pronounced changes in the women's classroom behaviors and interactions. Many of the women who started off the school year quiet, shy, and self-doubting were now taking on leadership roles and confidently participating in activities."

There is no formula or even curriculum to the Loves Herself Regardless class. It begins with love, the ability to express empathy, gain trust and to relate to the women, according to Char. It's based on relating to the whole person, respect and caring. Char's philosophy is that "the world will be changed one person at a time, by working on ourselves."

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