

One woman's story of depression and recovery Thursday, May 17, 2007

By Ramona Frances, Madera Tribune

Silence feeds the suffering for those who face life touched by depression and complicated by issues such as drug addiction, homelessness and related challenges.

A Madera woman said she only recently found the courage to tell her story publicly, a story that echoes the experience of many others living with depression. Gwen Palmer's hidden story of mental illness, drug addiction and homelessness has led her down a long road to recovery.

Palmer says the stigma of having a mental illness keeps many from seeking help. Palmer now believes she was fighting a diagnosis instead of an illness.

"It was easier to admit I was a drug addict than to say I am suffering from a mental illness," Palmer said. "I kept trying to fight it on my own. I would stop taking medication as soon as I felt better."

Deciding she does not want to live with depression, she went to the Madera Counseling Center crying.

"I thought my life was over," she said. "I didn't have anything to give."

Palmer said her counselor saw through her depression and noticed her strengths.

"He walked me over to the administration office where I filled out an application for the Mental Health Advisory Board and signed me up for the California Association of Social Rehabilitation Agencies training or CASRA."

The woman who sought help for depression now works as an outreach coordinator reaching out to other agencies and individuals to bring people to services appropriate for them.

"I love my job. I was born to do this," Palmer said.

Palmer said she believes people go through powerful experiences in life to better equip them to help others. Years ago she dropped her studies as a psychology



Gwen Palmer (left) facilitates classes on depression at the Hope House in Madera and enjoys a laugh with mental health advocate Jan Stutzman.

Photo by: Ramona Frances
/ The Madera Tribune

major at the University of Maryland.

"I guess I went to a school of another kind. If I hadn't experienced what I did in life, I wouldn't understand what others go through," Palmer said.

Palmer facilitates a Tuesday and Friday class called "Coping with Depression" from 10 to 11 a.m. at Hope House.

"If you know you need help, come get it. You might feel embarrassed to admit you have a problem, but don't let depression control you. You need to take control. Don't be afraid to get help," she said.

Depression coupled with isolation could be a dangerous combination.

"Some people are isolated in their homes until they come to Hope House. Some are brought in by counselors or case managers, and then begin to come on their own. We watch them change," she said.

Palmer said Hope House is not the "whole world" but an opportunity for entry back into the world.

The Hope House is located at 117 North R Street, suite 103, near Pistoresi Ambulance of Madera or call 664-9021.