

POETRY'S POWER TO HEAL

Writing is a path to recovery in substance abuse program

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*My soul has no presence.
My life has no essence.
— Lamont Jones*

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There are a lot of ways that Lamont Jones dealt with being a drug user.

He spent 52 days in a rehab facility. He went to meetings for three different recovery programs. And he wrote poetry.

It may not be what you expect from a former crack dealer who spent a year in a juvenile correctional facility, but as a 19-year-old practically bursting with anger at times, the young man has learned that a few carefully chosen words can go a long way to defusing his inner rage and sadness.

"Sometimes it seems like I get so angry or I bottle so much inside of me that I ain't got no room for my soul," explained Mr. Jones, who said he used to smoke marijuana all day, every day.

Poetry helped cut through all that and turned it into something beautiful.

"I didn't know I could put words into a sentence like that," the Lima native said in a soft-spoken voice. "I liked it. I did a couple more, a couple more, and it felt like it just took that gorilla off my shoulders. ... It just made me feel good, just getting a lot of stuff out."

Mr. Jones is talking about poetry therapy, an ancient concept that involves using poetry for healing and personal growth, and he got his first taste of it earlier this year during a stint at Compass Corporation for Recovery Services in the Old West End.

MULTIMEDIA

Listen to the poets read their work:

[John Esper](#)

[Dustan Gerschutz](#)

[Lamar Jones](#)

There residents of the substance abuse treatment agency receive periodic training from an unlikely teacher: Sheila Otto, a white-haired, 72-year-old retiree from Sylvania Township. A former public relations director at Lourdes College in Sylvania who sees creativity as a divine attribute, she teaches poetry writing as a means of introducing them to spirituality in a new way. Sometimes her proteges aren't sure what to make of her.

"They all guffaw when I tell them they're going to write poetry," she said.

It's not long, though, before they're working hard at haikus, cinquains, and other forms of poetry - some for the first time in their lives.

"For people who are nervous about their writing skills or never write anything, you give them a form in which they can pour their thoughts," Mrs. Otto said.

Long history

This simple exercise has soothed people as far back as biblical times and the psalms of David. In America, poetry therapy groups began springing up in hospitals in the 1950s. Reading and writing poetry have been used



John Esper, reflected in this puddle, learned at Compass Corporation for Recovery Services about the power of poetry to help recover from addiction. (THE BLADE/AMY E. VOIGT)

therapeutically for everyone from addicts to psychiatric patients to people suffering from illness, according to the National Association for Poetry Therapy.

There even is a certification program for aspiring poetry therapists.

Something about the format of poetry touches people differently than other forms of writing, such as a journal, said John Fox, a certified poetry therapist and author of *Poetic Medicine: The Healing Art of Poem-Making*.

"It allows the person to gather their feelings, their thoughts and experience, and distill that down into the condensed form we call a poem," he said.

"In some cases it's a way of releasing onto the page a very heavy emotional experience that one may be carrying and not expressing. The poem becomes a way to let it go," Mr. Fox, of California, continued. "In other cases ... the poem may offer an insight that one didn't know one had until you went and wrote the poem."

Sharing the results with others can be empowering as well. Especially in a place like rehab, poetry gives people a voice, a way to speak their truth, and an audience to listen and validate it.

"The more somebody wants to write, the more they become the author of their own life," said Diane Allerdyce, president of the National Association for Poetry Therapy. "It doesn't solve the problem, but what it does is it allows them some space to breath. They usually experience more joy. They experience a sense of accomplishment."

Jim Perrin, residential manager at Compass, said he's seen a change in those that participate in Mrs. Otto's sessions.

"What I see with the poetry is it lifts up their self esteem..." he said. "You notice them feeling better about themselves, becoming more confident, and moving forward in this recovery process."

'Pain of Addiction'

When cocaine addict John Esper came to Compass four months ago, the only poems he'd ever written were romantic little ditties to girlfriends. Now the former Marine swells with pride when he reads his latest creation, "The Pain of Addiction," even though it's full of darkness.

"I was stuck for a half-hour on one paragraph, but once it started flowing, I was so excited," the 42-year-old from West Toledo said. "As you're writing it, not only are you telling your story, but you're telling the story of other people."

His tale is full of lows. He got into cocaine in 1999, the result of peer pressure at parties. It cost him several jobs and hurt his relationship with his family. Before coming to Compass, he'd gotten high nearly every day for two years straight. He was homeless and so unkempt that he looked like a werewolf.

So Mr. Esper knew what he was writing about when he scribbled on some notebook paper: "When you finally hit bottom and see what you've lost / Say hello to addiction and see what it cost."

Mr. Esper knows his words will resonate with most addicts, but as he gets his life back together he hopes to educate non-addicts as well. After all, as a former high school athlete and veteran who despised drugs, he was once among them.

"I hated people who used drugs. I hated drug dealers," he said. "I didn't know they were sick, and until I got in the grip of this thing I never really understood. I just thought all people who used drugs were bad people."

Trying to get better

For a while, Mr. Esper shared a room at Compass with Dustan Gerschutz, 20, of Findlay. He was one of those sensitive high school kids with multiple piercings who was depressed all the time, dressed in black, and wrote free-flowing verse about hating life.

He also said he was an alcoholic who racked up a DUI and six underage consumption violations.

"Sometimes I would drink seven days in a row," he said.

The images in Mr. Gerschutz's poetry now are different: his family hurting, him slowly killing himself, trying to get better. The words don't come as easily as they once did, but in a way they're more powerful.

"It just opens up doors in your head," he said. "When you write it down, then you're like, that's actually how I was feeling and didn't even notice it."

Most of the poems Mr. Gerschutz wrote while at Compass remain unfinished. (He's now back home with plans to find a job and enroll in community college.) These shards of poetry are even darker, deeper, and more personal. It's not that he didn't want to finish them; he just couldn't.

"I didn't know the ending," he said. "It's more about life and I don't know the ending yet, so I'm going to have to wait to finish."

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SOME POETRY FROM REHAB

Sadness

Sadness burns my soul
Animosity fills you
Damn I feel so low

My Life

Live, live my life for the better
Even though life's a bitch

— Lamont Jones, 19

Dear alcohol

You make me smile you make me free,
You make me open for all to see.
You make me fun you make me bright,
You make me scream and want to fight.
You make me stupid you screw with my mind,
You make me fall time after time.
You make me freak out you make me calm down,
You make me forget all that is around.
You make me lie you make me cheat,
You make me steal and feel defeat.
You make me hurt you make me cry,
You make me wonder if I shall live or die.

— Dustan Gerschutz, 20

The Pain of Addiction

The pain of addiction from a personal view
It's hard to believe it can happen to you.
I tried climbing out of the hold I had dug,
But most of my life was controlled by a drug.
What I lose first I really don't know,
But my addiction said clearly it all had to go.
First on the list was material stuff.
As that disappeared I thought man life is rough.
To cover my actions I mastered the lie,
Never forgetting I had to get high.
Nothing can stop me, the disease is too strong,
Everything that I did just seemed to be wrong.
With shame and guilt deep in my heart,
I figured I'd move and get a fresh start.
It started out well, at least so I thought,
But my disease showed me things you just can't be taught.
You can't run away and there's no where to hide.
When you have this disease, addiction's your guide.
Smoking and hiding, I'm out of control.
With a snowball effect I fell down my hole.
When you finally hit bottom and see what you've lost,
Say hello to addiction and see what it cost.
Just be honest and willing and open your mind.
There's help from this sickness I hope you can find.
This disease can't be cured but it can be arrested.
The directions are there, they've already been tested.

— John Esper, 42

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