

New community center offers environment of sharing

By Tony E. Windsor

A regional non-profit mental health agency is hoping to take its message of hope to the streets of Seaford. Fellowship Health Resources, Inc. (FHR) will host a ribbon-cutting ceremony to open its new Acceptance, Change, and Empowerment (A.C.E.) Center on Thursday, Sept. 15.

An eight-bed transitional housing complex for adults will open at the ceremony as an addition to the community resource center that opened last month. The A.C.E. Center is located at the corner of Stein Highway and Bradford Street, Seaford.

In conjunction with the ribbon-cutting ceremony, community volunteers including local artists and FHR members will paint a mural under the Stein Highway Bridge. Local artist, John Donato, will design the mural, called the "Stein Highway Bridge Mural of Hope."

According to FHR Director of Program Services Laura Marvel: "The mural's design is inspired by Emily Dickinson's poem 'Hope.' We are encouraging anyone from the community to participate. The theme will be present in the grass, blue sky, feathers, and leaves of the mural and we're hoping that there will be some dedications made to parts of the painting."

She said community members are invited to offer names of people they would like to memorialize in art on the mural.

John McNamara, director of Peer Services for FHR's southeastern region, said the new A.C.E. Center offers educational and employment services, health and wellness, arts, culinary and horticultural programs for members.

Walking through the Center building, McNamara shows off the many rooms that will house special programming for those people who will take advantage of the variety of services. "This is mainly geared toward socialization skills," he said. "The whole concept here is based on self-help and peer-to-peer interaction."

McNamara said there are no doctors or other professionals who supervise the operations at the A.C.E. Center or transitional residential complex. "We have people who have been through the program and understand some of the issues that our consumers are dealing with," he said. "People here are free to come and go as they please and we have 'Peers in Charge (PIC)' who oversee the operations."

McNamara knows what he is talking about. In 2003, he was diagnosed as bi-

polar. He had been a successful businessman who developed corporate business strategies. He decided that he would not be defined by his illness and began seeking support to deal with his symptoms.

"We don't define someone based on the fact that they may have an illness like diabetes," he said. "The same is true with mental illness. I am someone who lives with being bi-polar. We accept that we have this illness and we work to keep it under control and live our lives."

After McNamara learned that his mood swings were caused by his bi-polar condition, he became involved with Fellowship Health Resources. He has since worked the entire program and now helps others who become peer service providers.

"It is therapeutic to have the chance to converse with and share concerns with someone who knows what you are going through," he said. "This peer-to-peer opportunity provides a non-threatening, welcoming environment for our consumers. It promotes self-awareness and self-help. It is a wonderful alternative to the institutional setting."

The A.C.E. Center also contains a recording studio where special weekly radio shows are taped. McNamara hosts an hour-long health-based show on FM radio station 99.5. The show broadcasts each Wednesday at 6 p.m. "The show not only promotes an awareness of mental health issues, but features information about health in general," he said.

Currently the A.C.E. Center has about 58 members and McNamara hopes to see the numbers grow. He said the Center is open to not only those people who have mental illnesses or addictions, but their family and friends as well. "Sometimes people just want to understand these things a little better and develop ways to cope," McNamara said. "This is a great environment for simply socializing and sharing. I like to discuss this from the aspect of developing a life plan. In my professional life I developed business strategies. I think it should be no different for our lives. We need a life strategy."

The A.C.E. Center has a full kitchen and McNamara said there are classes held to teach culinary skills and how to develop proper eating habits. "A lot of the people who come here are on fixed incomes and it is sometimes difficult to eat healthy without spending a lot of money. We hold classes to show people how they can eat healthy and do it without spending a lot of money," he said.

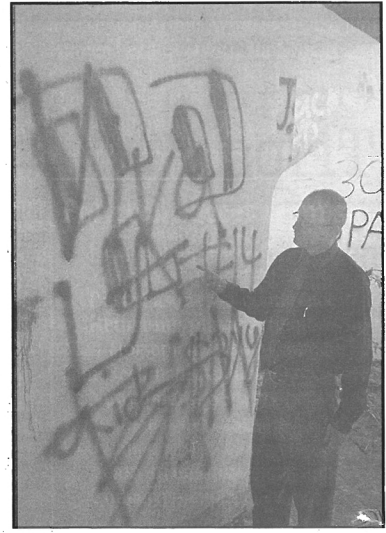
Art is also featured in some of the A.C.E. Center classes. Throughout the center there are works of art that were created by some of the facility's members. Art will also be the medium used to help transform the graffiti-filled walls and columns under the Stein Highway Bridge. September 13 through 15, over 2,000 square feet of concrete will become an artist's canvas as the bridge mural is created.

McNamara said he encourages local "taggers" to apply their art skills as part of the mural. "We want anyone to join us who wants to help convert the underside of this bridge into a thing of beauty and hope," he said. "I would like to see some local taggers join us and show off their creativity. Once they see the concept the artist [Donato] has for this project I believe they can create something very special."

Founded in 1975, FHR (Fellowship Health Resources) is a nonprofit agency providing both clinical and support services to persons recovering from mental illness, co-occurring disorders, and other life challenges in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Delaware, Maine, Virginia, Pennsylvania and North Carolina.

Fellowship Health Resources' staff is dedicated to delivering and coordinating comprehensive community-based services that promote independence, stability and increased skill levels for its clients.

The A.C.E. Peer Center will hold its grand opening ribbon cutting ceremonies on Thursday, Sept. 15, at 3 p.m. The A.C.E. Center offers educational and em-



John McNamara, director of Peer Services for Fellowship Health Resources' Seaford location, stands under the Stein Highway Bridge. A ribbon-cutting will be held to open the new FHR Acceptance, Change, Empowerment (ACE) Center and part of the festivities will involve a community-based project to paint a mural over the existing graffiti. Photo by Tony Windsor

ployment services, health and wellness, arts, culinary and horticultural programs. For more information, contact Regional Director Ken Donovan at kdonovan@fellowshiphr.org or Laura Marvel at 934-1861.