

VCF EDUCATION rP 1/4/88

Program lends a hand, an ear, a shoulder

From fearful to successful: Re-Entry women make the mark

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HUNDREDS of women's lives have changed for the better thanks to a card table set up 14 years ago in the hallway of Cabrillo College's administration building.

The Women's Re-Entry Program, which has gone from the card table in the hallway to a small space in the campus Women's Center, helps women return to school. Between 150 and 180 women enter the program each semester. They have been away from classes for three to 30 years, and represent everyone from graduate degree-holders to high school dropouts. They all share one thing — apprehension about going back to school.

"They come in for the first time confused, worried and with low self-esteem," said Maxine White, program director. "Some have been beaten down by life — they have family and financial problems."

Sue Morgan had had 25 years worth of those problems when she entered the program three semesters ago. She'd raised two children alone and operated a restaurant in Nevada City.

"I used to think, 'Is this it? God, there's got to be more.' Once you're in that (single parent situation) you can't seem to get out," she said.

Morgan, 44, waited until her two children were in their early 20s before she started to live for herself.

"I'd gone right from being a baby to having one," Morgan said. "When they were grown, I asked myself, 'Now let's see where was I (25 years ago)? Oh yes, getting ready to go to college.'"

Now, that's about all Morgan does. She rents a room from an elderly woman in a Santa Cruz

mobile home park through Seniors' Shared Housing. There, in her words, she has "no kids, no pets, no houseplants or material possessions."

That's an improvement over her first few weeks at Cabrillo. Morgan didn't have a place to live. She showered in the gym and sometimes went hungry.

"Those were hard days," she remembered. "But I'm a survivor."

Her hard days also included learning to be a student.

"I didn't even know what kind of paper to bring," she said. "I brought a stenographer's notebook and a ballpoint pen to my first class. I didn't know how to study — how to do that stuff. All I knew how to do was read a novel."

Core classes offered through Women's Re-Entry helped her learn everything from how to take notes to showing up on time. Morgan was embarrassed she didn't know those things already, and was scared she'd never learn them.

"The third day of class, I showed up in the Women's Re-Entry office crying. I told Maxine, 'I don't know what I'm doing.'"

White stopped her work and listened to Morgan's fears and frustrations. She reassured her, gave her some helpful tips on college survival and sent Morgan on her way.

Four days later, Morgan stuck her head inside the Women's Center door and called to White, "I love school!"

Morgan, a women's studies major, survived her first 15-unit load with a B average. Since then, she's made straight A's, with the exception of one B.

"I study every chance I get," Morgan said. "I study between classes, in the bathtub, while I'm eating... School is my life."

But school could have been the death of her self-esteem, already low when she first enrolled, she said.

"I might have given up many times if it weren't for the Women's Re-Entry Program," Morgan said. "The women here are just wonderful. Their support is invaluable."

"If you go into that office, see Maxine, and she'll get you going," said Pat Lombardi, former re-entry student. "So help me God, they take you by the hand. They help you through each process of registration."

Lombardi had attended Cabrillo more than a decade ago when she was first out of high school. She didn't do well.

"I had no plans, no vocational goals, no idea of what I wanted to do," Lombardi said. "I did that off and on for three years."

She finally left school and went through a series of jobs including waitressing, grocery checking, working as a veterinary aide, then as a nurse's aide. She even owned a cafe in Ben Lomond.

When her daughter was born four-and-a-half years ago, Lombardi found herself on Aid to Families With Dependent Children, AFDC, and with about as much earning capacity as she had the day she left high school.

"That's what started me thinking about school," Lombardi said. "But whenever I thought about it, I'd feel overwhelmed. I was afraid because I didn't do very well the first time. I never had study skills."

Lombardi said she saw an ad for Women's Re-Entry and made herself call the number. The staff invited Lombardi to an informational and orientation meeting at which she learned about the program.

She also learned she wasn't



Chip Scheuer

Sue Morgan loves school now thanks to Cabrillo's Women's Re-Entry program.

alone.

"You think you're the only one. You aren't a 19-year-old student just out of high school with no responsibilities," Lombardi said. "I found all these other women like me."

That camaraderie, plus career and guidance classes and support from Women's Re-Entry staff, have put Lombardi well on the way toward her career goal as a registered dietician.

Like many re-entry women, Lombardi started slowly, with a nine-unit class load. The next semester, she added another class.

She just finished her hardest semester, with a full load of

algebra, Spanish and study labs. Her grades weren't what she wanted them to be, and she said she's struggled to stop equating four-point grade averages with being smart.

"I know there are ups and downs," Lombardi said. "It'd be easy to quit. But I've got this thing — I want to pay my own way."

Like Morgan, Lombardi said she has had a hard time with math classes. She's taken advantage of tutors, individualized instruction and other help offered on campus. Both women said they spend many hours on campus beyond class time.

"I look at this as my job," Lombardi said. She credits the

support of her parents, the Women's Re-entry staff and the Women's Center for helping her gain a winning attitude. She'll transfer soon to San Jose State University's nutritional science program.

"It's something within me," she said. "I'm not going to quit. I'm not going to drop out. I will not quit."

And heaven help anything that comes between Sue Morgan and her college career.

"I feel so full of knowledge, of interests," Morgan said. "I want more, more, more. I really do think I can change the future of women. I'm finding out the true meaning of 'lady.' There's no stopping me now."