



Wayside House alumnae Lisa Drake and Kathryn Leonard remain part of the center. Leonard is board president. **Photos by Tim Stepien/The Coastal Star**

A Delray Beach fixture for nearly 50 years, women's recovery home has big plans after getting \$1 million grant

By John Pacenti

Lisa Drake slept in the parking lot of the American Legion Hall in 1990, waiting and hoping she could find a bed nearby at the Wayside House, a recovery center for women.

The director had given her a rubber band to wear around her wrist, which she could flick to give herself a distraction anytime she thought about drugs or alcohol.

"You had to prove that you were willing to go," Drake said. "When I came in here, I just had a bag of clothes. And I walked away from everything I owned. I was just empty — black."

Long before Delray Beach became arguably the recovery capital of the world, Wayside House existed for women who suffer from alcoholism and drug addiction. It has survived while other recovery centers in the area closed in recent years in an industry roiled by fraud.

The facility, in the 300 block of Northeast Sixth Avenue, is preparing to celebrate its 50-year anniversary in 2024. It's already receiving gifts. In February, U.S. Rep. Lois Frankel announced Wayside would be one of 15 nonprofits receiving money she obtained through the Community Project Funding process.

How will the \$1 million be used?

Wayside House CEO Lisa McWhorter said that Wayside is renting its administrative building, but would like to build its own. A survey has been approved by the board, "seeing what we can build here and looking to expand on our own property."

New flooring, a fence of some sort and electrical wiring in the oldest part of the house — originally the postmaster's home — are also on the agenda.

Delray Beach Mayor Shelly Petrolia said she helped put Wayside on Frankel's radar and lauded its mission to take a woman from a desperate and desolate place to one of hope and recovery.

"I've always been a supporter," Petrolia said. "It is operated well. It is there for the right reasons, doing the right things by their clients, and they offer the support that is needed."

McWhorter said one reason Wayside has survived is that it is a stickler for following rules by which recovery centers must abide.

It aims to serve any woman with an alcohol or drug problem, but makes a special effort to reach at-risk people, such as pregnant women, IV drug users, those involved in abusive relationships and those fighting to keep their kids.

It is a 12-step program that usually eschews the typical 30-day in-patient treatment model for one lasting 60 to 90 days, where clients will eventually be stepped down to an outpatient program — known in the industry as PHP, or partial-hospitalization program.



CEO Lisa McWhorter.

"I try not to have repeat customers," said McWhorter, who describes herself as a "warm-and-fuzzy cuddler." The idea is to give the women who come through Wayside the tools not just to get clean and sober — but to stay clean and sober.

McWhorter said it is important to bring loved ones — spouses, siblings, children — into the treatment plan because alcoholism and addiction is very much a family disease, often spanning generations.

House has a homey feel

People hold a reverence for the white frame cottage, built originally in 1922, as if it is bathed in the positive energy of women who have recovered within its walls. The beach-style bungalow was obtained in 1974 for \$1,000 by Susan B. Anthony — great-niece of the women's rights advocate — and counselor Phyllis Michelfelder, who co-founded Wayside House.

"When I first walked in, my oldest daughter was with me," said Kathryn Leonard. "We walked in and she goes, 'Mom, doesn't it just feel like you're walking into Grandma's house?'"

Leonard graduated as a Wayside client in 1992 and immediately got involved in the alumnae program, in which women who have recovered come back to help guide those trying to get clean and sober today. She is now president of the Wayside House board of directors.

"I met Lisa because she used to come back and smoke on the porch with me," Leonard said of Drake, who remains involved with the center as part of its alumnae program.



Tammie Sellman, chief development officer, is a key person behind grants Wayside House has received.

A walk through Wayside House is like entering a labyrinth, a hidden secret right smack in the middle of downtown Delray Beach.

The administration building contains executive offices, a boutique full of donated clothes, a career center and an alumnae gathering place.

Lush vegetation amid brick walkways and gazebos connect the main house and a separate facility for a therapeutic program. The main building was purchased one year after Wayside was founded by Anthony and Michelfelder.

In the main house, women keep busy. One is helping the chef in a beautiful new kitchen. The house has 26 beds available and several gathering places, including an outdoor courtyard in the center of the building.

The wizards behind the curtain at Wayside are Tammie Sellman and Marlene Passell. They are grant-getting machines. Both the kitchen and the chef are paid for by grants obtained by Wayside. The \$1 million federal grant was the most recent cherry on top.

And money is always needed. Wayside had to raise the main house right before the pandemic because the foundation was crumbling.

Sellman is also in charge of fundraising. "I can say that 92 cents of every dollar goes towards programming," she said.

McWhorter said the real assets of Wayside House don't come from grants or even donations — but from the continuity represented by former clients like Leonard and Drake. There is ready-and-willing

support for any woman who walks through the doors along with a staff that believes in the mission.

"The girls come back and they talk about the house," McWhorter said. "They'll mention the therapists and the staff, but they talk about the house and how special the house is."

Sent from my iPhone
Please excuse typos.