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Sarah Bartlett offers women a voice via writing at Women Writing for (a) Change—Vermont in Burlington.

By PAULA TEDFORD DIACO

Now in her seventh year as director and owner of Women Writing for (a) Change—Vermont, Sarah Bartlett continues to offer writing workshops and classes at a new location at 180 Flynn Avenue in Burlington.

She has also added a new writing circle and art workshops at the Northwestern State Correctional Facility in Swanton, made possible by an Arts Learning Grant from the Vermont Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Bartlett initially came to Women Writing for (a) Change in 1993 while participating in the program's writing classes and retreats in Ohio. In 2004, she was among the first to be licensed by the founding organization to establish an independent program in Vermont based on those principles and practices.

The women who participate in her programs are often undergoing life changes: the death of a family member; changing careers; becoming empty nesters; or realizing that they simply need to use writing as a tool for growth and change. They vary in age from fourth graders to octogenarians.

Some members are writers new to the Burlington area and are looking to make a connection with other women. Docie Woodard joined Women Writing for (a) Change for just this reason when she returned to Burlington from Seattle four years ago. She attended the Thursday morning circle up until March of this year; started writing personal narrative; and then found herself writing fiction.

"I always wanted to write," Woodard said. "And, joining a group was a priority."

According to Woodard, the structure Bartlett offered gave her a framework and place to start for writing. "I've taken the class enough that I have quite a portfolio, and now I think of myself as

someone who has writing to share," Woodard said.

Some of Bartlett's clients have never picked up a pen, but have instead sought company with like-minded women. Other members are considering writing memoirs, and come for the discipline a group structure offers, much like Woodard did, and the support and feedback of their peers.

Melissa Cronin was new to writing when she discovered Bartlett's Thursday morning circle almost two years ago. She took the advice of her writing professor at Community College of Vermont, who encouraged her to join a writing group. She found Women Writing for (a) Change online, called Bartlett and joined.

"I was excited and intrigued about it," Cronin said. "Sarah provides great feedback, support and encouragement."

Participating in the writing circle, getting constructive feedback, and enjoying support from the group helped Cronin decide to further her education in writing. She is now enrolled at the Vermont College of Fine Arts and is working on earning a Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Nonfiction.

"It was hard emotionally to leave Women Writing for (a) Change," Cronin said. "I made great connections there."

Classes are typically three hours long, and Bartlett opens each session with a poem. Participants are allowed to check in about their writing, and then craft a fast write of a poem or a writing exercise. They break into small groups, and provide critique and feedback on writing brought from home.

Participants are free to explore any and all genres, Bartlett stressed, and the projects they bring to the circles can be as varied: poetry, fiction, memoir excerpts, even speeches.

"The premise is that the writers own their writing and ask for the feedback that they need to make their piece go to where it needs to go," Bartlett said. "Hearing different responses is part of the power of what helps the writer know if her words have hit her mark. Ours is a safe and confidential space."

Bartlett holds advanced degrees in health education and language, and considers Women Writing for (a) Change a place for experiential, rather than didactic, work. "It's internal work that is also personal. Moms, therapists and businesswomen join, but I never ask what they do," Bartlett said. "What we bring here is not what we do in the world."

Her mediation training comes in handy. "I set

clear boundaries that this is therapeutic work, but not therapy," Bartlett said. But, she added that there are no boundaries around the writers' work.

In January 2010, Bartlett began a weekly writing circle at the Northwestern State Correctional Facility. In June of last year, she received her Arts Learning Grant, which funded her work through June 2011, and allowed her to expand the weekly writing circle to include a monthly art workshop done by visits from area artists.

Bartlett's goals include helping women to find and use their voices for truth and personal empowerment; learning to be respectful listeners; learning to give positive feedback; building and maintaining a community; and using writing as a tool for growth and change.

For one art workshop, Bartlett called upon colleague Teresa Davis to join as one of the visiting artists. Each month, the writing and art projects have related themes, and various other local

artists have taught there. As she does with all of her circles, Bartlett created an anthology of the participants' work. Some of the themes included reflection and connection, speech and silence, intention, trust and emergence.

Another of Bartlett's initiatives started March 7 to benefit Women Helping Battered Women. The program is similar to the California-based Hand-made Especially for You, where volunteers join to knit and crochet scarves for battered women entering local shelters. As Bartlett described it, the scarves are a symbol of a woman's bravery in leaving an abusive situation, and are a way to lift her spirits while symbolizing her transformation.

"This will expand into something bigger," Bartlett said.

Besides being a workshop facilitator, Bartlett is a writer. She is a published poet, and has contributed chapters to anthologies. Her latest project is a chapbook – a pocket-sized booklet – of her poetry, *Into the Great Blue*, to be released July 1, 2011 by Finishing Line Press.

She also offers private consultation and collaborative workshops that include other art like yoga and mixed media.

"It's my passion to support adult and young women who wish to write," said Bartlett. ❖