

*Remarks from Iris, a participant in the first horticultural therapy (HT) support group at the Orange County Rape Crisis Center (Spring 2007) to the attendees (270 people) at the November 9, 2008 fundraising auction for the OCRCC at the Sheraton Europa Hotel, Chapel Hill, NC<sup>1</sup>. The HT SG was co-facilitated by long-time Center volunteer Amy E., and Christene Tashjian, horticultural therapist.*

Thank you, Amy, Christene.

I am here tonight to share with you a little part of my story and the incredibly uplifting and ultimately life-changing experience that was this horticulture therapy group.

I was raped when I was 19. Over the next four years, my life became increasingly unbearable until I finally became suicidal. I kept going to the crisis center's website over and over and just arguing with myself and struggling over whether or not I should try to get some help, but when the horticulture therapy group popped up, I became much more interested in actually making something happen.

I decided to participate in the support group for reasons that were still very vague and elusive to me at the time. My guess was maybe to let go of some pain and the overwhelming sense of heaviness and hopelessness, to find some understanding and people to relate to again. But I think I really choose to do it because of the fact that it was a horticulture therapy group. I thought, "Ok, plants. I love those; they are in my comfort zone. Maybe this won't be so uncomfortable and difficult if plants are involved." I'm not sure I would have been strong enough to throw myself into a group without that element of familiarity. But I really had no concrete ideas of what I wanted from the group; I just knew that I didn't want to live like that anymore. Nor did I have many expectations, for I had pretty much forgotten what hope felt like.

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<sup>1</sup> The HT support group program was featured at the auction. There were silent auction items made by participants in the Summer 2008 group; proceeds went directly to the HT support group program. Michelle Johnson, Assistant Executive Director, OCRCC introduced the program and the co-facilitators. Christene gave an overview of HT and an example of how HT is used in the support groups. Amy outlined the other nature-based components of the group, acknowledging the contributions of Suki Roth, herbalist, Green Hope Farms flower essences, and the many local farmers who donated flowers. Amy introduced Iris. Following her remarks, a "Fund the Need" was conducted and auction attendees held up their bid cards indicating a \$50 donation to the HT support group. Enough funds were raised to hold a third HT SG in Spring 2009.

The person who joined that group was very different from the person I am now. Just to give you some idea of what life was like for me before and during the group, I'll share some of my own losses that I wrote down from the grieving ceremony that Amy mentioned earlier: I have lost the ability to feel loved, my sense of belonging, my sense of direction and the future, the ability to maintain any type of relationship. I have lost innocence, lightness, joy, my sexuality, my love for adventure, my motivation to live.

In a million years, I would have never guessed that I could have gotten all that I did out of being in the group. I'm not only alive now, but I have the courage to be standing here (sort of). I am thriving.

So I really do think the support group experience alone is invaluable even without the horticulture therapy component. It's a place to find compassion and for people to understand you, a safe place to share and grieve and heal and speak and listen. But I also really believe the horticulture aspect added a much deeper level to the amount of healing I was able to do during that time.

There is so much symbolism in nature and in horticulture, if you start paying attention. The cycle of planting and cultivating and composting and weeding, death and rebirth, growth and blossoming provides a perfect metaphor for the healing process that survivors of any type of trauma go through. Having these activities made my own healing so real and so apparent; and it made processing those changes much easier. It became something I could literally see happening, and not just something I was trusting my intuition or sub-consciousness to take care of. I found that sometimes, I didn't even have to think about what was happening, I could just do the activity, and watch my emotions follow my physical actions.

I could speak forever on other ways the horticulture group helped me heal, but I'll name just a few. **Nature in itself** is so therapeutic. Even just having the plants around was deeply nurturing. **Having an activity** that could resemble some sort of hobby was very empowering. I think it had been a while since any of us could remember being a part of something meaningful, and it was so nice to have that, as simple as it was. **Being with a group of women who all had this common love** of nature made it that much easier to become comfortable and to trust and feel connected to each other, which was also something none of us had experienced for a long time previously. And it was so smart of have this **wonderful resource to draw upon that we**

**already knew made us so happy.** Through caring for these plants, we really learned **how to take care of ourselves** again.

But above all, this group gave me **tools to carry with me after** our sessions were over. I was able to start thinking of **plants as constant helpers and friends.** They're a great reminder now when things go wrong that there will always be this source of comfort, even if it is hard to find anywhere else. They also taught me how to **live and enjoy and really bask in** the present moment by finding more beauty in everything and more awe in life, which was the most important key to recovery for me.

I have nothing but **profound and overflowing gratitude** for the center, and for Amy and Christene whose extra work and dedication to this group is just astoundingly amazing. And for the horticulture therapy group for not only changing my life, but essentially saving it. The love and joy I am capable of now is overwhelming, and it's hard to find words to describe what a shock and relief it was to find that capacity in my heart again.

I have goals now, I can make decisions, I am in a healthy and happy relationship, I'm on my way to becoming a yoga teacher, and I am even learning, albeit slowly, to be comfortable with my body. Because of this group, I was able to take something unspeakably horrible and find grace in it, turn it into limitless positivity and the greatest learning experience of my life.

And lastly, I really want to extend that gratitude to everyone here. You guys are really the ones who make this sort of transformation and magic possible. Without your support, so many women like myself wouldn't have the opportunity to grow and blossom as we have. So again, thank you for being here and for everything you do for the center.