

Statesman

FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT, THE STORY OF SMITHVILLE'S SERENITYSTAR RECOVERY

By Mary Huber
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New Year's Eve 2015 Ryan McDonald took a handful of pills in his parent's house and laid down to die. A father of two, he'd been in and out of drug treatment centers most his life and decided that day that sobriety wasn't something he could have.

For McDonald, like many others, the path to healing is crammed with darkness.

McDonald didn't die that day. He woke up in his home and asked for help. His dad called a woman, Rosie Lopez, who runs a treatment center in Smithville, and handed the phone to his son.

"The gig is up," Lopez told McDonald, who arrived at SerenityStar on a Monday and eventually recovered there.

That was 17 months ago. A lot has changed at the treatment center that stretches along a city block in downtown Smithville.

Now, a mural with rays of golden sunlight made with glass and mirrors, angels rising over gravestones, fire and blackness winding toward flowers and light stretches from the entryway down 52 feet.

A project by former Austin-based artist Stefanie Distefano, the mural is a visual representation of what the center's more than 60 residents say defines their own journeys to the rooms on the other side.



Stefanie Distefano observes the work on the mural leading into SerenityStar Recovery Center in Smithville, which symbolizes the patients' journey from darkness to light. MARY HUBER/SMITHVILLE TIMES

Drawing from personal experiences, the artist and residents came up with ideas for the figures that decorate the pathway - mantras, saints, soaring eagles, their favorite sayings.

The group began work on the mural a month ago and hope to complete it for a debut in September.

Distefano offered to construct it free of charge.

The artist, who hails from Austin, ended up in Smithville by happenstance. She went one day to eat at a small restaurant on First Street run by addicts and alcoholics, the Comfort Café. There she met Lopez and Teri Costlow, founders of the restaurant and its adjoining treatment center, SerenityStar.

The birth of a recovery center

For the pair, now married, the dream of SerenityStar was born - like many of life's hard-won things - of destruction and fire.



Rosie Lopez and Teri Costlow founded SerenityStar Recovery in 2009 in an old sharecropper cabin between Bastrop and Smithville, where they used to host 12-step meetings. The building later burned to the ground, and eventually, the couple opened their treatment center and the adjoining Comfort Café on First Street in downtown Smithville.

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Lopez and Costlow had each suffered separately years of addiction and alcoholism. They met in New York in the early 2000s, and despite Costlow's marriage, fell in love. Barely a year sober and unsure of the next step in their lives, they asked for a sign from God. Costlow left her marriage and the new couple drove to Texas in a Suzuki bound for Smithville.

They opened a small restaurant called the Wildfire Cafe on Texas 71 at Alum Creek and hosted 12-step meetings there - 23 a week.

In late February 2009, a small group gathered for the first business meeting of SerenityStar treatment center. The next day, the Wilderness Ridge fire took everything - the meeting house, the café, the beginnings of their dream.

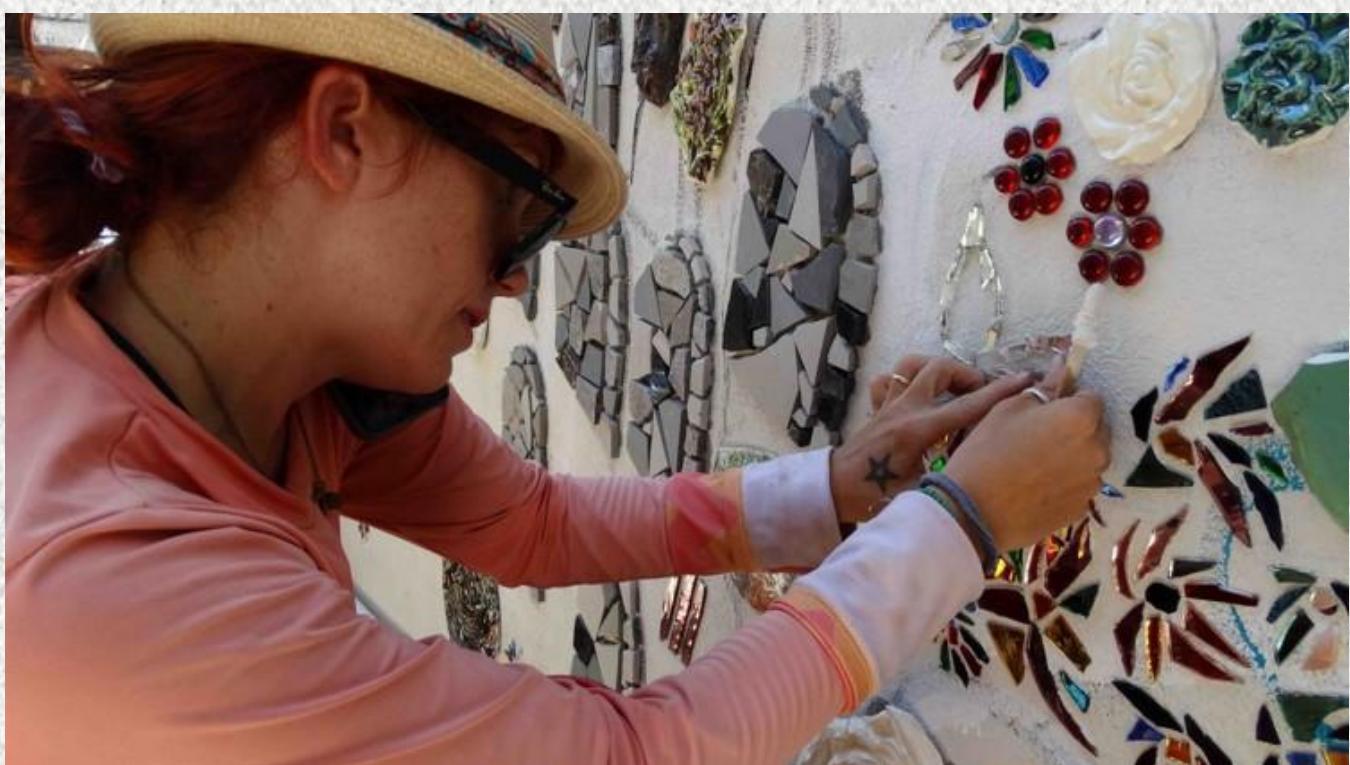
The couple eventually acquired a building on First Street through a friend of a friend who believed in their mission of recovery. A café came with the purchase - a run-down restaurant the previous owner had tired of running.

The restaurant was renamed the Comfort Café and became a symbol of support in the community for struggling addicts with no place to go. People who knew Lopez and Costlow's stories came in and asked for help.

In those rooms, a treatment center was born.

Now a six-month to multiple-year peer-to-peer program, SerenityStar bills itself as a place of whole-body wellness and healing, focused on more than just addiction recovery. It's open to men, women and their children, and adolescents, and treats alcoholism and addiction, as well as sexual abuse, codependency and a host of other maladies.

"This is so much more than getting sober," Costlow said.



Ali Benham works on the mural leading into SerenityStar Recovery Center in Smithville, a symbolic representation of an addict's journey from darkness to light. MARY HUBER/SMITHVILLE TIMES

The couple, over the years, recognized that money was often an insurmountable barrier to quality treatment. Now, they offer services at SerenityStar to anyone regardless of financial capability.

"We believe anyone who wants the opportunity to change their lives should be able to do that," Costlow says.

Changing a community, one addict at a time

Comfort Café has always been the primary source of revenue for SerenityStar - even though its menu is entirely donation-based. Residents in the center work in the kitchen and dining room on weekends. Others volunteer their time to a newer program, SerenityWerks, which performs services in the community like construction and cleanup. It's also donation-based.

One day, Lopez said, they hope to own an entire city block filled with donation services performed by drug addicts and alcoholics.

The real-world work gives residents an opportunity to learn to live sober in the face of real-life challenges, and staff say the work they do in the community is changing the face of Smithville and the public face of addiction.

Many of SerenityStar's graduating residents have opened businesses in town or taken jobs at the center itself, including McDonald, who tried to take his life and by God's grace, he said, now directs the men's house.

"I've committed to one day at a time because I believe in one day at a time," McDonald said. "I am committed also to being an addict living in recovery and proud of it. I don't believe in anonymity. I believe anonymity is killing people."

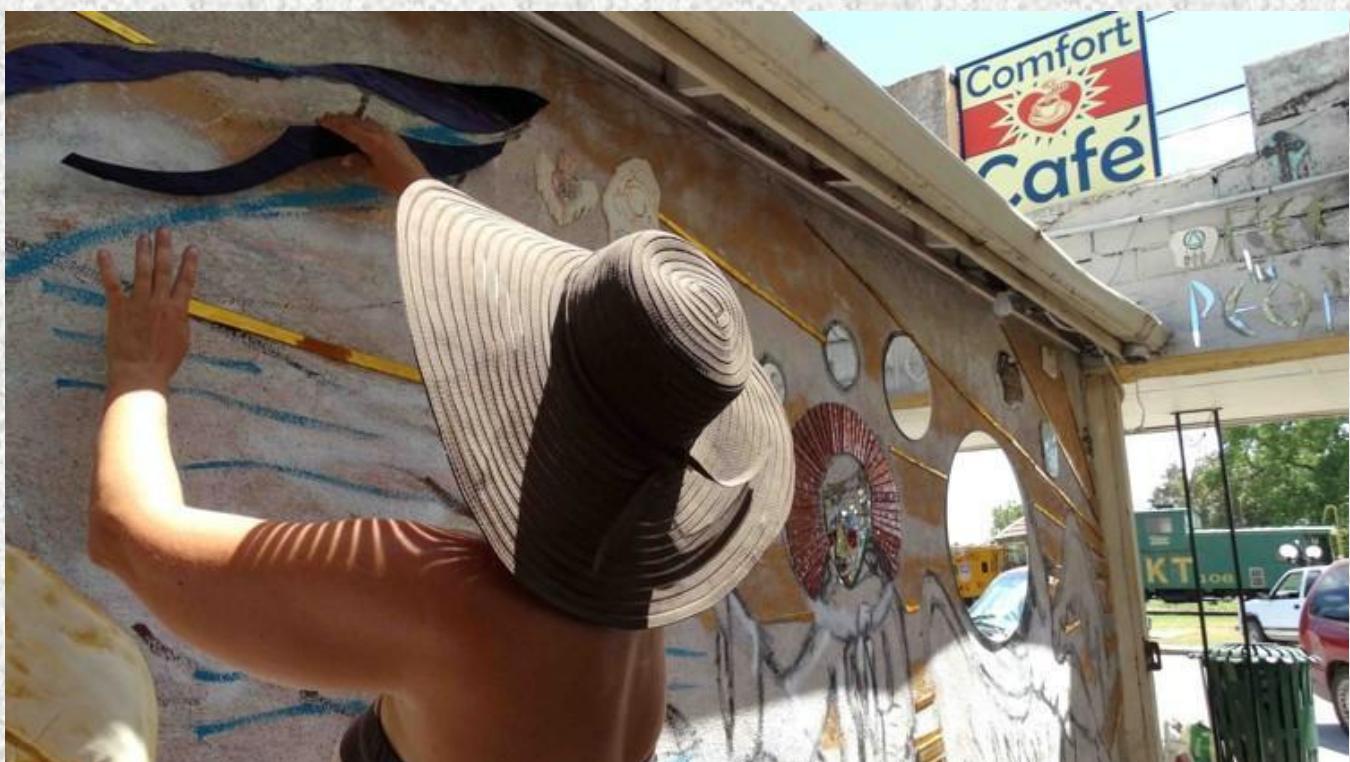
He speaks frankly to those who will listen, like most at SerenityStar, with conviction and appreciation.

In the entryway, Distefano traces her hands over the mural taking shape between the café and meditation room - the shining glass sparks beams of light against a tattered sign that reads "Comfort Café," and beneath it, emblazoned in mirrors, "Feed the People," the message Costlow and Lopez heard when they first came to Smithville all those years ago.

Distefano, who has never struggled with addiction, said even she has found a home there.

"The journey of the soul for me is not about addiction recovery, I think it's true of every single human being," she said. "We go through the dark and fight to come out."

Her sentiments are echoed by dozens on the patio outside the café, putting their hearts and lives back together one day at a time.



Stefanie Distefano, a former Austin-based artist, works on a large mural in the entryway to SerenityStar Recovery Center in Smithville. MARY HUBER/SMITHVILLE TIMES