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City agency to honor author

By: Maria Garriga , Register Staff

NEW HAVEN — Words can set you free, but they can also establish connections between people and build them into a community.

That's why Fellowship Place will honor bestselling author Wally Lamb Thursday with one of its Communitarian Awards for teaching women prisoners how to write their own stories.

Fellowship Place is a New Haven-based nonprofit agency that offers rehabilitation and support services to people with mental illness. Fellowship Place got its start as a social club 46 years ago for people suffering from mental illnesses. Most community centers declined to offer meeting spaces because of the stigma attached to mental diseases. The Jewish Community Center of Greater New Haven opened its doors and shared its resources, allowing Fellowship Place to flourish. JCC will also get a Communitarian Award this year for its role housing Fellowship Place for when most places would not even rent space, said Lindy Lee Gold, past president of the JCC board of directors who was also a member of the Fellowship Place board.

"Most Fellowship members came out of their medical appointments and hung out in the center all day long until their meetings. The center provided its pool and gym, as well as postage and clerical help," Gold said.

The Communitarian Awards, held at the Fellowship Place's 441 Elm St. campus, will be the highlight of the agency's 2006 Street of Dreams Spring Festival. The festival will also feature, music, theatrical performances, and a buffet by Fellowship Place's catering division.

"The Communitarian Awards are for somebody who builds community because people in recovery need to be part of a community," said Fred Morrison, Fellowship Places' executive director.

Lamb taught the women to use words to free themselves from emotional cages every bit as repressive as their prison bars.

Tabatha Rowley, who wrote "Hair Chronicles" in prison while taking Lamb's writing class, invited him to Fellowship Place where she now works as the coordinator of services for the homeless.

"He is the most giving person," she said. He also required rewrite after rewrite and came up with the inspiration of telling her life story as a progression of hair styles.

"A lot of my stories had to do with my hair, and Wally said I could chart my life through my hair styles," said Rowley, 33, of New Haven.

She took his suggestion and wove the stories together into the "Hair Chronicles" in which she goes through a rebellious patch defying her parents and bleaching her hair to the time she landed in prison and let it grow long, to the time after her release when she cut it.

Tickets to the event can be purchased for a \$50 donation to Fellowship Place and include admission, food and a copy of the "Couldn't Keep it To Myself." Students can attend for \$15 for admission and a meal, but not the book.

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