



Women's group creates bonds during midlife

BY MIKE KILEN • REGISTER STAFF WRITER • FEBRUARY 8, 2008

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We've heard of senior moments. But what about midlife moments?

One day we wake up, look around and ask: "What am I doing here?"

Some label it crisis and buy a red convertible or body enhancements, or just have a mental breakdown.

Deb Anderson, 51, and Barbara Wicks, 47, faced middle age in a trendy way - by purchasing the services of other women to help them through it.

In the process, they helped each other.

Last year, they attended a year-long program, called Tending Your Inner Garden, created by two central Iowa women who had been through the midlife battle. The program, which costs \$650, lets women get together and listen to each

other explain what they really want.

It sounds simple, and maybe a good mother would work for less.

Yet Inner Garden's creators, Deb Engle and Diane Glass, have brought together 120 women in their five years of the program and are starting to hear promising stories.

Burned-out women are ditching bad jobs or relationships, renewing their marriages or health, or discovering a new hobby.

The question is also simple: "What gives us joy and how can I get up in the morning and do this?" said Engle, who remarried after a divorce, published a book and moved to the country after finding her middle-aged footing.

The program is successful partly because of the "Oprah factor," they told Time magazine, which noted the Gardens program as part of a burgeoning national trend: businesses that help women navigate middle age.

"It's like 'midwifing' women into their lives," Engle said.

Wicks and Anderson found they were birthing similar plans.

Listening and learning

Wicks' "moment" was well-defined. The marketing director at a Des Moines architectural firm said she likes to keep "controlled and in control."

But after attending the workshops - group discussion and activities such as art, music, journaling, nature appreciation and music - she came to a sobering realization.

"A bell went off in my head, encapsulating something I'd been struggling with," she said. "I was not being listened to, not in my work (nor in) whatever I was doing. No one was listening.



CHRISTOPHER GANNON/THE REGISTER

Barbara Wicks, left, and Deb Anderson say joining the women's spiritual group, Inner Garden, has brought out the best in their artistic sides.



RODNEY WHITE/REGISTER FILE PHOTO

Diane Glass, left, and Deb Engle have worked with 120 women in five years through their workshop.

INNER GARDEN

The next year-long session of Tending Your Inner Garden begins Feb. 16. The group meets in Carlisle at Diane Glass' home and cottage. The cost is \$650, which includes meals, four workshops, monthly meetings, dinners and a journal. Registration and a free newsletter are available at innergardener.com. Or call (515) 462-4004 or (515) 989-4532.

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"So I realized I had to find ways to make myself heard."

Wicks - married, no children - had dabbled in photography in extensive vacation travels with her husband. But she didn't take much time for it or show it to many people.

Meanwhile, Anderson, a Des Moines lawyer, was learning about herself. "I had these barriers I put up in my own path. I was able to recognize it was me and not someone else that put them up. I realized I had to make those decisions."

They began to listen to their inner voices.

Engle and Glass use the metaphor of the garden: Women need to dig into it as the seasons of their lives change.

"The main thing is, women have to trust themselves," Engle said.

And each other.

Encouraging each other

The workshop day last winter was moving along - women asking probing questions of each other.

No one gave advice, just listened. They broke into small groups, like a modern-day quilting bee.

The question was asked in various forms but, laid bare, succinct: What do you want?

Anderson and Wicks began to talk.

Wicks saw herself at age 75, sitting there thumbing through beautiful photographs, being asked why she never sold them and then blurting out, "For God's sake, why didn't I do it?"

Anderson asked herself why she wasn't taking time for her own creativity. She had worked with clay, but life's duties chewed up her time.

The wife and mother of two had enjoyed spinning her clay on her wheel in the basement. It emptied her mind of clutter.

She didn't find enough time to do it, though, or have the confidence to take her wares to an art show.

As the year-long program continued, the two encouraged each other, egging the other on to showcase her work in public.

Anderson applied for a spot in the Valley Junction Spring Art Market.

She was accepted.

Wicks was so thrilled for her workshop friend that she went to the show and bought some of her colorful bowls.

A few weeks later, Wicks' photos, which accentuate geometry and color in the places she travels, were showcased at ArtFest Midwest. Anderson bought two of her photographs.

It has led them more peacefully toward middle age.

They're finding more time for their art and don't worry as much what others will think of their creations, cultivated from a community garden as much as an inner one.

"One thing I noticed is you think your life is unique," Wicks said. "No one experiences what you are. Then, talking to this group of women, you realize how much our lives are the same, even though the issues may be different."

Reporter Mike Kilen can be reached at (515) 284-8361 or mkilen@dmreg.com

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