



## WEATHER

Wednesday: Early shower, then sun, heat! A bit muggy; highs in mid-80s. PAGE A7

Art by  
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# DAILY HAMPSHIRE GAZETTE

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## TUESDAY

### GRADUATES' GIFT

Smith College School for Social Work's graduating class gives a gift to the Freedom Center, a Northampton-based advocacy group for the mentally ill.

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## NORTHAMPTON

DAILY HAMPSHIRE GAZETTE A3

# Social work grads stay true to cause

By RYAN DAVIS  
Staff Writer

**NORTHAMPTON** — Each year, the graduating class of the Smith College School for Social Work gives a class gift of money raised by student dues. Usually the gift goes back to Smith, but at commencement Aug. 15, this year's class gave its gift to the Freedom Center, an advocacy group for the mentally ill.

According to co-founder Will Hall, the mission of the Northampton-based Freedom Center is to work against human-rights abuses in the mental health system, including mistreatment, forced drugging and over-reliance on medication. It is the only group in the area run by and for those diagnosed with mental illness.

The \$1,500 gift from the School of Social Work came after the Freedom Center gave presentations at the school and students attended the group's recent Speak Out and a protest against ServiceNet.

"The donation came as a big surprise," Hall said. "We are still planning exactly how to spend it, but I expect the money will be used to help pay our rent, print educational

material, pay speakers" and other expenses.

In a letter to the Freedom Center, Smith student Shawna Reeves Nourazaie, 26, had said students' encounters with the group opened their eyes to the debate surrounding mental health treatment.

"Freedom Center's members give us a perspective that is all but absent in our curriculum. It is crucial that we hear this perspective, and Smith needs to make this happen," she wrote. "We really couldn't think of an organization more deserving of our class gift. You all are an inspiration."

At the ceremony, Hall told students, "It is a great honor to receive this gift and a sweet irony, because it is very rare for a roomful of therapists to listen to what a person diagnosed with schizophrenia has to say."

In a phone interview last week from her home in San Jose, Calif., Nourazaie said students who attended the Freedom Center's Speak Out "were really struck by the power of their stories and experiences."

"We're so busy learning to be therapists that we often don't know what our clients are going through," she said.

The donation to the Freedom Center marked the first time in more than two decades that the class gift was not given back to Smith, Nourazaie added.

The all-volunteer Freedom Center was founded two years ago and encourages reform in the mental health system, such as increased information about psychiatric medications and adequate funding for treatments such as nutritional healing and a peer-run safe house alternative to hospitalization.

Freedom Center organizes support groups and yoga classes, and occasionally stages protests, such as one this month that accused ServiceNet of a "pattern of mistreatment," in Hall's words.

Freedom Center had been funded by a \$15,000 grant from the state Department of Mental Health, which was eliminated in July.

"They said we are too radical and claim we are anti-medication, which is not true," said Hall. "We believe they feel threatened because we're well-organized and are not towing the psychiatric party line."

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