

Business

Edgartown's Turkey Land Cove Foundation offers women respite to work, create

By Sean F. Driscoll

Posted Jan 7, 2018 at 6:32 AM

Updated Jan 7, 2018 at 6:32 AM

EDGARTOWN – For Laura Lind-Blum, it was a chance to plan new products to add to her custom jewelry line.

For Laura Clark, it was a respite from caring for her 88-year-old father and an opportunity to celebrate her achievements while planning an online membership program to support creators and entrepreneurs.

And for Kelly Carmody, it was a chance to learn landscape painting, an artistic avenue she wanted to develop personally and professionally.

The women are three of more than 100 who have won working residencies from the Turkey Land Cove Foundation, a Martha's Vineyard nonprofit organization that awards stays of between one to three weeks at a home nestled on four remote acres in Edgartown, giving them the physical, emotional and creative space away from their daily lives and allowing them to focus on their professional, educational or artistic goals.

Founder Katherine "Kitty" Burke had such an opportunity at a crossroads in her life, and after she bought the property in 1990 it was her dream to turn it into a place where other women could do the same, she said.

"Basically, women have to wear too many hats in their lives," she said. "They have to go to work, they have to be a homeowner, they have children they have to take care of. There are so many things that block their creative spirit. This lets that go, if only for a week or two.

"If I could help other women make their life better, that's just great," she said. "It's gone beyond, way beyond, what I ever envisioned."

Quiet surroundings

The foundation awards fellowships from Sept. 15 to June 15 in two sessions, fall and spring, and an alumni session from Nov. 15 to May 1. For each of the first-timer sessions, between 20 to 24 awards are given from an application pool that typically ranges from 25 to 40 women, said Executive Director Barbara Welsh. The applicants come from across the country and have a variety of personal backgrounds, from recent college graduates to expectant mothers to grandparents. They also hail from a variety of disciplines — the screening committee doesn't look for specific kinds of projects, she said, but rather the ability of the applicant to make the best use of their time as possible.

"They want to know 'Can you really peel yourself away from your life and do this?'" she said.

Grantees spend their time in the Tree House, one of two houses on the Turkey Land Cove Foundation property that overlooks Edgartown Great Pond. The other is the Pond House, where alumnae stay when they come for a return visit; both were renovated and designed by Burke after she bought the property. The open-concept, airy homes have expansive water views and multiple options for women to hunker down and work, including porches, cushioned nooks, offices and studio spaces.

During a stay, the women have little in the way of obligation aside from a brief orientation and an exit interview with Welsh. A chef, Cindy Curran, prepares meals and snacks, which are delivered every few days; otherwise, the grantees have the house, and the grounds, to themselves.

It was that quiet that most affected Clark, 56, when she arrived at the Tree House for her residency in December. A Hope Valley, Rhode Island, resident, her free time is almost nonexistent between her massage therapy business and caring for her father, who lives in Newport and has suffered three significant health crises in the last four years.

“I sat here the first night in the quiet, and the only thing I could hear was the clock and it was a little disconcerting,” she said.

“When you walk into that space, one of the things you’re greeted with are scrapbooks where previous residents have written notes. The experience is like being handed a baton of creative energy,” said Lind-Blum, 56, who had her first stay in late October 2016 and returned as an alumna in December. “It’s actually a little bit daunting. You come in and people have brought their heart and soul of their work into this place, and you can feel it. It’s in the walls.

“There’s a desire to really want to live up to that and carry it forward.”

Creativity sparked

But the solitude quickly becomes an asset, both for the professional and personal needs of the grantees.

“I literally can sit here and have three meals a day,” Clark said. “I’m not in the car, I’m not feeding my father, I’m not telling four dogs to shoo. That, in and of itself, is probably the most nurturing thing about this space.”

Carmody, 40, a Waltham-based painter, said without her fellowships — she’s there for her third round, a three-week stay, this week — developing her landscape painting skills would have taken a back seat to her more lucrative painting and teaching work. But thanks to her time away, her skills have developed enough that she is now earning money from those works.

“It’s a really hard thing to afford to do that in my own life, to make things that won’t sell,” she said. “I’m very high-strung and running a business, and being a painter, means being crazy. It’s very nice to be here.”

Photo Gallery: Turkey Land Cove Foundation

Michelle Onuorah, a 26-year-old author and filmmaker now based in San Diego, made her first trip to the Turkey Land Cove Foundation in May 2014. At the time, she was a recent graduate from Biola University and was in a self-described “funk” trying to sort out her employment and living situations.

When the foundation popped up on a list of grant opportunities, it immediately attracted her attention.

“I thought it was an interesting and unique idea. I had never heard of a foundation that provides residency,” she said. “Everything about it was interesting to me.”

She used her first residency to finish work on her second novel and prep her third, plus develop a business plan for a publishing company she hoped to get off the ground. Her second trip was focused on other creative pursuits, and she’s returning again later this month.

“I think the women who are drawn to this foundation, they don’t come into it with the mindset of ‘Oh, this is a nice little vacation,’” she said. “They’re hungry for something to change their lives. Coming out to this space, there’s something really sacred about it. You’re able to do things on a level that you wouldn’t be able to do in your own circumstances.”

Celebrations, and a look forward

Burke’s vision began in 2010 after using her friend, internationally renowned author Min Jin Lee, as a test subject. Now, the foundation has awarded fellowships to more than 100 women, a milestone it celebrated in April with a three-day conference in Providence to allow its alumnae to meet one another, share their accomplishments and further foster their leadership and creativity.

The residencies accommodate only one woman at a time, so it was the first opportunity most of the grantees had to meet one another and share their experiences. It was also the first time that Burke was able to see the entirety of her dream realized.

“That was really kind of a huge thing,” she said, fighting back tears.

But as with many nonprofit groups, sustainability is the biggest challenge facing the foundation, which so far has been funded by Burke’s largesse. The property is hers, but the cost of the transportation, food and lodging ran about \$100,000 in 2015, the most recent year that data is available through the foundation’s publicly available tax returns.

“I don’t know what the next step is, but I think there will be one,” she said. “We are going to have to turn that corner if we are going to get bigger.”

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