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Fitchburg man finds salvation with origami

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FITCHBURG -- A smile spread over Walter Oppenheimer's face, as out of the corner of his eye he noticed a child marveling over his origami exhibit at the Fitchburg Public Library on Tuesday. Since taking up the traditional Japanese folk art of paper folding, Oppenheimer has found more than just joy in the craft, he's found salvation.

"I was in a real dark place with drugs and alcohol," Oppenheimer said, as he welled up. "But now when I get in a bad situation or mood, I turn to that instead of turning to free my mind." Although Oppenheimer didn't want to delve into the details of his life before sobriety, he said he went through a rough stretch and alcohol, before something changed within himself roughly nine months ago. "I can't explain it. I just knew God had higher plans for me, and I needed to turn things around otherwise I go through the **Our Father's House** Leighton Street Program, and has since cleaned himself up and has been sober for nine months." Then one day I was at the Fitchburg library when I stumbled upon an origami book, and I found this talent inside me that I must have had all along," he said, while showing off his display in the library's front lobby.

Origami is the craft of transforming flat sheets of paper into art through folding and sculpting techniques.

It's been an inspiring transformation to witness, said Judy Egan, a case manager at **Our Father's House** in Fitchburg.

"I've been in the business for 20 years, and I've seen a lot of people come and go, but it's been an absolute pleasure to see Walter thrive," she said. "He's a true success story to know that he was close to death, and now worked his way up, and is just an inspiration to everyone at **Our Father's House**."

Now wherever Oppenheimer goes, people can see him steadily working on a sculpture.

"Whether I'm at my apartment, the library, the bus or the doctor's office, I'm always making a new creature," he said. "The greatest joy about doing origami is the cool factor. I can't even describe how happy it makes me when I give someone a sculpture and this smile appears on the person's face and for that moment you made their day."

His creations can be seen in most public places around Fitchburg, he noted.

"There's some at the bank, the post office and all around," Oppenheimer said. "I give them away wherever I go."



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"But if they don't have my initials on the bottom though, they're a fake," he joked. He finishes each sculpture he makes by adding his signature and date on the bottom.

Oppenheimer usually creates two to three sculptures a day, and also enjoys playing the guitar at his apartment provided through the **Our Father's House** Leighton Street Program.

The program provides housing for chemically addicted homeless people who are committed to straightening out their lives and need of transitional housing.

"I don't know where this is taking me, but I know it's somewhere special," he said. "My goal is to try to get an exhibit in the art museum. ... I'm hoping that through my creations and exhibits I can inspire others who are going through tough times that there is a light."