Gardner resident Jonathan Dudley, a volunteer at the Chair City Community Workshop, helped coordinate the now-completed project. He gave a presentation about its findings to the Montachusett Suicide Prevention Task Force during the group’s meeting recently at Heywood Hospital.

“One of the big things we talked about was how do we revalue the work, skills and experience that have been devalued by the process of deindustrialization,” he said.

The Montachusett Suicide Prevention Task Force was formed in 2012 following a community assessment that revealed a higher-than-state-average suicide rate in the region.

The task force is comprised of local leaders from a variety of fields such as healthcare, including from Heywood Hospital and other organizations, education and law enforcement.

INDUSTRY 4

Barbara Nealon of Heywood Hospital speaks at the recent meeting to discuss the effects of deindustrialization.

The Chair City Community Workshop has spearheaded dialogue on how Gardner can collectively recover from the loss of industry and its social effects.

Over the course of last year, the workshop embarked on the Healing Our Communities Project with the consultation of Kathryn Dudley, an anthropology and American studies professor at Yale University.

She has researched the impact that losing manufacturing industries has on communities, including in her 1994 book titled, “End of the Line: Lost Jobs, New Lives in Postindustrial America,” which tells the story of a 1988 Chrysler assembly plant closing in her home state of Wisconsin.
INDUSTRY
FROM PAGE 1
Professor Dudley, who is of no relation to Jonathan Dudley, met with both the Chair City Community Workshop and the task force as part of the project last year.

The conversations largely focused on the impact losing furniture factory jobs in Gardner had, beyond just the economic impact, as furniture making was the main industry in town.

One of the benefits of Professor Dudley’s involvement was her ability to show what happened in Gardner is very similar to what has happened in other places across the country where jobs left due to political, economic and technological reasons such as trade policy, cheap labor overseas and automation.

The Chair City Community Workshop, located at 306 Central St. in Gardner, has become known for its project of transcribing interviews of former Nichols & Stone employees into hand-made books in a process that relies on volunteer help.

Nichols & Stone closed in 2008, being the last major furniture factory in Gardner to do so.

Jonathan Dudley is the partner of artist Tracie Poulit, who leads the workshop and conducted the interviews of former employees in 2009 while visiting Gardner. Poulit’s father worked at Nichols & Stone, and she also worked there during her summers away from college.

A main thread in the books is how the employees often worked at Nichols & Stone for many years, developed relationships there and strongly identified with their work. When the factory closed, there was a deeper sadness created beyond simply losing a job and having to find another.

Jonathan Dudley explained that while the books tell individual stories, the Healing Our Communities Project was able to analyze “the ways that big economic dislocation causes social trauma.”

He said a main inspiration for pursuing the project was the 2010 suicide of Guy Savoie, who worked at Nichols & Stone for over 30 years and was one of the interviewees for the community workshop books.

“We felt there was a need to have a broader conversation,” Jonathan Dudley said, in order to “help people see their personal loss and connect them to a bigger group of people.”

The culminating event of the project was a televised panel discussion held last fall at The Gardner Museum, which Professor Dudley took part in.

At the event, Professor Dudley spoke about the rise in “diseases of despair” that occurs in communities when a major industry leaves, such as alcoholism and opioid addiction, and also suicide.

“We’re talking here about trauma that is happening collectively,” she said, “I think at a basic level it’s a feeling of having the ground drop out beneath you.”

Professor Dudley submitted a report at the conclusion of the project going over how social trauma manifests itself in two basic ways, which she said are both evident in Gardner.

One of the ways that trauma is shown is through self-blame. Despite the job losses being out of their control, people will find themselves at fault.

Professor Dudley reported that the flip side of self-blame is a feeling of resignation. When people feel resigned after losing their job, they presume there is nothing they can do to overcome obstacles and often blame the “rigged system” that benefits others and excludes them.

“The context of deindustrialization, the social isolation that comes with the loss of shop floor solidarities is quite real. Yet the pain of broken social ties is only part of the picture. With it comes the conviction that lives like yours do not matter and the labor that you once performed in concert with others is no longer socially valued,” Dudley wrote. “This devastating conclusion can be hard to argue with, and is only assuaged by forms of collective action that mourn what has been lost and revalue the work traditions and skills that may endure.”

At the recent task force meeting, members spoke about giving serious consideration to the ideas that emerged from the project and Professor Dudley’s remarks.

Christine Johnson, who works for Leominster-based Montachusett Home Care, spoke about the idea of developing a community gathering place where people could “keep trades alive.”

Displaced workers with years of experience could meet with peers and still practice their trade, and pass along their skills to younger generations too.

“If there was some sort of space for this to occur, you could bring in the youth,” she said.

It was also discussed at the meeting how even if a former manufacturing worker can find another job, there is often still a sense of identity that is lost when the skill set they honed and took pride in is no longer used.

Michael Ellis, who leads Heywood Hospital’s suicide prevention program for men, suggested there still could be value in creating a community space for practicing trades even if it is not done for monetary gain.

Task force members expressed desire to continue to focus on possibilities for how the community could address the effects of deindustrialization going forward.

“I see this as continuing to be part of the task force effort. It can’t just be a few people doing an effort,” said Barbara Nealon, director of social services and multicultural services for Heywood Hospital.

Both Nealon and Jonathan Dudley described working with Professor Dudley as “validating.”

“I think she just reinforced everything we had been feeling,” Nealon said.

The Healing Our Communities Project was made possible with a $750 grant from the Community Health Network of North Central Massachusetts.