



"Let a positive transcendence and positive
transcendence in it!"



CREATIVE COMMUNICATION

CONNECTICUT'S EMPOWERING ART OF HEALING

As a devotee of art, you grasp its power to inspire, inform and instigate. But what about its power to rehabilitate? A new program in Connecticut is getting encouraging feedback from the at-risk and health-challenged participants of a project that involves them in arts-themed activities as an alternative form of treatment. Their artwork and testimony is now on display in a fresh exhibit — “The Art of Healing” — that will travel to a variety of southeastern Connecticut venues throughout the summer.

The project is the outcome of brainstorming sessions of seven health and social service agencies that decided to try art therapy for the individuals they treat who struggle with a wide range of conditions — from mental or physical disabilities

to substance abuse, depression, psychiatric disorders, social fears and more. Coordinated under the guidance of the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition, the agencies have more than 700 individuals of all ages engaged in arts-based projects, and overall, they provide therapeutic and education services for 24,000 in New London County.

Wendy Bury, executive director of the Southeastern Connecticut Cultural Coalition, explained that the decision to try art therapy was influenced by the promising results being observed where it is used. Engaging patients in creative activities is “happening around the world,” Bury said. “In fact, the U.S. is a little late to the game on this one.” Art therapy has been practiced in England for more than a decade. Studies there have concluded

Acrylic paintings by clients of Sound Community Services who are recovering substance abusers. Painted with coaching by artist Katie Fogg. From left to right: Positive Transcendence and Panda Bear. Photographs by Brandon Slowik.

that involving patients in creative projects improves cognition, memory and concentration; reduces anxiety, depression and stress; and helps patients to deal with grief, anger and frustrating conditions. Artists who partake in these projects also testify that it is a rewarding and sometimes transformative experience.

In the United States, the National Endowment for the Arts is investing heavily in art therapy to treat war veterans suffering from PTSD and other ailments. Noting that southeastern





Masks created by former homeless clients of Reliance Health by means of acrylic pouring with direction by artist Jerry Wagner. Photographs by Brandon Slowik.

Connecticut is laden with defense related institutions, Bury said it seemed a natural place to explore it with the civilian population.

Each of the seven Connecticut agencies was free to choose an artist who would develop a project to directly engage the people it serves. Projects ranged from street art to molding to painting, writing and videography. After completing their project, participants were asked to describe how participating in art helps them heal and how they feel when making art.

"Art relaxes me, stops the wheels from turning, gives my brain a break;"

"When I view art, I like to imagine I'm floating in the ocean with no worries or stress around me," were two comments of individuals from the Child & Family Agency of Southeastern Connecticut, which provides children with mental health and psychiatry services.

"Working in a group helps to open my introverted self to enjoy creating with others," said a client of Reliance Health, in Norwich, an agency providing housing and family services. Artist Jerry Wagner worked with 22 formerly homeless people served by Reliance and was very moved by his experience. He chose to let them explore acrylic pouring,

which is pouring a mix of paint colors onto a canvas or into a mold. They created a variety of masks and small canvases with fluid curvilinear shapes of eye-catching color combinations. "It was very satisfying to see people experience the joy and excitement that comes from creating a piece," Wagner said. "And then the confidence and satisfaction for them when they come to a beautiful gallery and see their work on the wall."

Other artists did a group project. The Lighthouse, a New London agency



helping people with intellectual development disabilities, chose graffiti artist John Paul O'Grodnick (JPOart) from New York to work with teens with high-functioning autism. "We were looking for something a little more edgy because we're working with teenagers," said Cassidy Brown, Lighthouse's director. "We tried to engage them as much as possible." They began by having a free-flowing discussion of bullying, its impact and power dynamics. Each participant relayed their personal experiences and translated their feelings into images that express the emotions of what bullying means to them. Their result was a collectively painted wall mural of geometric and abstract shapes and vivid colors that resembles street art

on building exteriors.

Artist Katie Fogg provided painting lessons for seven recovering substance abusers being treated by Sound Community Services of New London. After demonstrating a few basic painting techniques with acrylics, Fogg's approach was to create an energy in the room that each person could feed off. "Even though we were all working on a similar project, I wanted to emphasize that we really are all connected." They had a group discussion that ranged from laughing and joking to revealing personal problems. "When you're making art," Fogg said, "it does help relax you when you have an open conversation. The most important thing we did is build a relationship with one another."

didn't want them to have an expectation," of what a finished piece would look like, Fogg explained, "but to really just enjoy themselves. That in itself begins this process of self-observation, self-awareness and the ability to express yourself through emotions. Some had an emotional background towards their work and looked for support and guidance on how to create that image." One is a stormy looking scene made by a woman who "wanted to express her journey through her emotions and the pain that she's been through." Fogg taught them how to speak without words, the woman said. Another woman, who never did a painting before, made a panda bear.

Agencies participating in "The Art of Healing" project include: Artreach, providing creative and performing arts opportunities to assist in mental health treatment; Child & Family Agency of SE Connecticut; The Light House; Reliance Health; Sound Community Services, treating people with substance abuse conditions; Horses Healing Humans, therapy through interaction with horses; and Our Piece of the Pie, offering teenagers creative outlets and business plan training to sell their work.

The Art of Healing exhibit began at Marquee Gallery in New London in May and New London Main Street Gallery in June and will travel to different venues throughout the summer including the Alexey von Schlippe Gallery at UConn, Avery Point in Groton and Reliance Health Gallery in Norwich.

| **Tom Soboleski**

