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Heart to art therapy

Exploring the journey where art meets healing

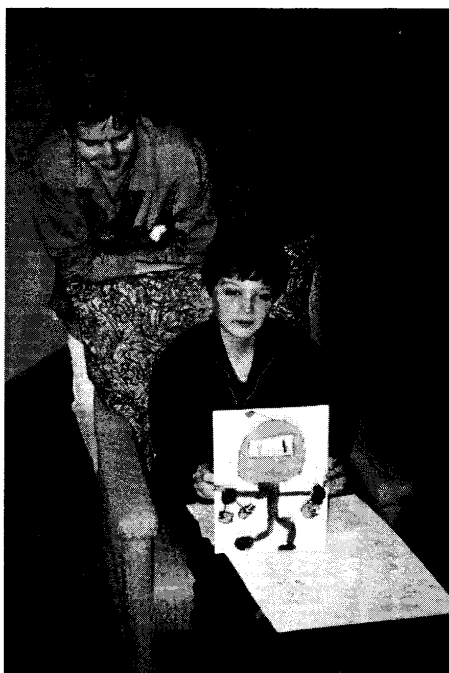
by Lea Birch

Lea Birch is currently the Co-ordinator of the Health Connection Program - the five day residential program for young people affected by cancer, their caregivers and families, at the Yarra Valley Living Centre, home of the Ian Gawler Foundation, Yarra Junction, Victoria.

Lea developed the Art Therapy Program for the Oncology Haematology unit at the Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne. Her practice is based on Phonophenetics Counselling and Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy.

For decades the Arts have been used as a means of expression. Painting, drawing, sculpture, movement and dance all enable the participant to express their individuality and enter into a realm of self-development and inner transformation. Artists have been drawn to this realm of exploration for centuries, diving into their unconscious and unleashing the deeper side of their nature, as they contact unexpressed and hidden parts of themselves, bringing about a merging of the unconscious with the conscious.

During summer vacation of my final year at art college, I ventured wide-eyed and enthusiastically through some famous galleries of Europe. I strolled through Uffizzi in Italy, the home of Botticelli's "Primavera" (Spring). Mesmerised by its



Mark, 13 years, with his art work, at the first 'Health Connection' program.

beauty and grace, the gift of this painting still lives in my heart. From Italy to the world of Turner's "Thunderstorm" at Tate Gallery. "Life is unpredictable and belabored with turbulence", was the message from this fine piece of art. The power and courage of human dignity depicted in Rembrandt and the suffering and ecstasy of Van Gogh, sits clearly in my memory in juxtaposition to the light of the soul in Monet's "Water Lilies".

My journey as an art student had awakened me to the wonder of human emotion, expressed so passionately and openly by these great artists. At the end of three years at arts college, with a degree in fine arts and a major in painting, I packed up my brushes and set off in search of a way to promote the gift of "expression through the arts" to help ease human suffering.

I have discovered through the arts and my experience with painting, drawing and sculpture, that these are fine mediums that can be utilised as forms of non-verbal communication. They are effective not only as a means of expression but as a tool for healing. With careful precision these mediums help to extend the quality of expression of one's inner experience. Anger, for example, can be physically punched, hit or beaten into clay. Painting freely with watercolours may express the relationship of inner flow toward a given situation and the colours chosen may give insight to the individual's inner landscape.

I gained insight to each individual's perspective and set about learning more, to put on-going theories into practice. My journey took me to teenagers at risk of suicide. Together we painted the darkness. We drew the torment of growing into adult life and we opened doors of wonder, unravelling ways to truly live in this world. It became clearer to me that people "stuck" in one perceived reality were able to move more easily from one space to another, once a door was opened. The expression released

through art therapy freed people up to walk into the full expression of their life.

Philophonetics

To develop these skills further I embarked on a counselling degree that utilizes the art forms of movement, gesture, drawing, sculpture, painting and music for healing. Philophonetics counselling, on which my current art therapy program is based, has grown out of the philosophy of Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy and psychosophy, the anthroposophical approach to psychology, which encompasses the study of man as a three fold being, comprising a body, soul and spirit.

The practise of philophonetics counselling addresses the conscious relationship to one's inner life and provides a range of tools for self-care, well being and personal development. It incorporates the belief that each one of us is potentially equipped to deal with and make use of all the challenges and opportunities presented on our journey. Every aspect of one's life can be traced and mapped in the subtle dynamics of the body and it is through this process that philophonetics counselling works with the body as a tool for contacting life experiences. We are continually absorbing good and bad experiences from the outer world which remain within us as an echo in the subtle body. The expression unleashed through this form of art therapy provides a wealth of information to revisit, release and to heal.

In 1995, I developed an art therapy program for the Oncology Haematology unit at the Melbourne Royal Children's Hospital. The program was geared specifically to give emotional support to children with cancer and their siblings and to assist in adapting to the often-frightening reality imposed by their illness. The program was implemented by firstly creating a space where the children felt safe to explore their feelings and concerns related to cancer. From that point we would draw, paint and explore our way through the journey of self-expression. At the same time, I ran a private practice, addressing a variety of issues from chronic fatigue, ano-

rexia, rape, depression, substance abuse and lack of direction, to counselling for couples and how to live life to its fullest.

With each client I offered tools, tools of inner strength, self-parenting and self-love. Clients gestured their pain through their body by gesturing their experiences. We used drawing, painting and clay modelling to sculpt the outward expression of the inner conflict, so we could free the

was to commence twelve months of intense chemotherapy and radiotherapy to reduce the tumour so that surgery could be performed. My first session with Annie was two days after diagnosis and she remains my client to this day. She is presently in remission. All our sessions take the form of drawing and painting, because I have learnt over the years that for four-year-olds these are the most effective tools

for self-expression. It is easier for them to express themselves through a visual medium, as these skills are already highly developed and supported by an active imagination.

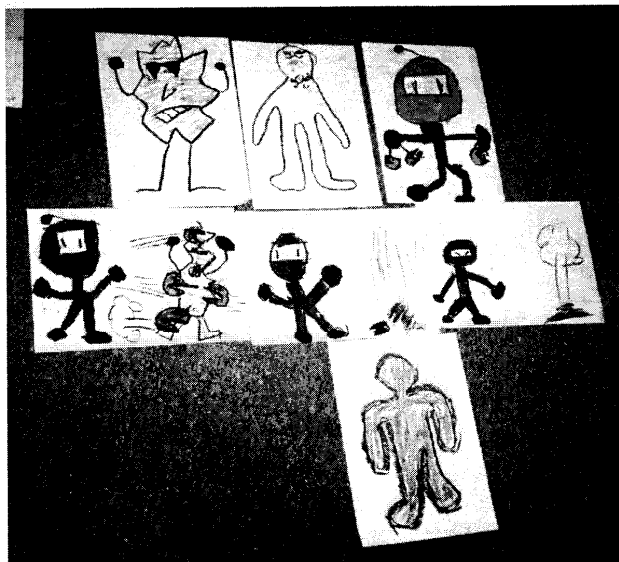
First session

I asked her to paint a picture about what it was like to be in hospital. Annie drew her hospital bed, big, dark and black. She drew a few items in the room, yet the painting was void of any people. As she painted she talked about her drawing. I was able to develop a picture about her emotional state through the information given directly by her. I determined that she felt very alone and frightened and

set about making friends with her to alleviate her predicament.

Subsequent session

The nursing staff requested I start some in-depth therapy with Annie. She was experiencing extreme problems coping with her medical procedures. She was bed-wetting and suffering bouts of withdrawal and hysterical fits of panic. I asked Annie to undergo a "feeling exercise". She was to draw eight different feelings



Artwork created by Mark showing the stages of his healing journey

body and determine what it needed for healing.

Case study

Annie was a four-year-old patient of the Oncology ward when she first became my client. She was diagnosed with osteo sarcoma of the upper arm, which is a soft tissue tumour growing out of the vicinity of the joints. Upon first diagnosis the possibility of amputation of her arm was a real factor in her prognosis. She



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she was having about being in hospital. From doing the exercise I found the biggest problem Annie was facing was in the treatment room itself, where she was being taken to have needles and other medical procedures. I asked her to draw what it was like in there. She drew with full force. When I asked her to explain the drawing, Annie told me what happens in the treatment room. There was red rain, which she told me kept away the black poison rain, which also appeared in her drawing. She said that if you touch the black rain you would die. She drew blue islands and the sea and her teddy that takes care of her. She told me she hides in the islands with her teddy, Boris, who made sure no one harmed her. I was amazed at the ability of a four-year-old to transform painful and stressful experience into a place of hiding and safety with the support of her teddy bear. I was also interested in how she used her imagination to protect herself. If Annie could develop a place of safety within the pain, then she could cope much better. I worked on developing a place of safety with her and we used her story as a source of visualisation, each time she went into the treat-

ment room. Afterwards, she would draw me pictures of the places she visited. In one of those drawings she was flying with Boris and Blackie the bird, in a plane over a waterfall.

Follow-up

As a follow up session I asked Annie to draw a picture about how she was



Inaugural program of the Health Connection...staff, support, clients and families. Lea Birch, seated, front right.

feeling in the treatment room now. I thought it was important to see how she was coping emotionally and to be fully conscious of any changes. Annie drew herself lying on the treatment room table, having her needles. She had a smile on her face, her favourite nurse was by her side and so was Boris, the teddy. Annie was feeling much safer and supported and had presented a picture of emotional stability.

One young boy I was working with gained much balance and clarity throughout our time together. It became apparent to all of us that his journey was coming to an end and we worked together to make his departure as peaceful as can be. He spoke to me quietly, knowing his time was limited and he told me he wanted me to do something for him.

He said he had a wish that a place was available where young people like him could go when they had cancer, to know more about their illness and learn ways of improving their lives, irrespective of whether they lived or not.

He mentioned to me that he knew Ian Gawler had a place that helped adults and that there should be a place for kids. I approached Ian Gawler and within a year, I was asked to work at the Gawler Foun-

ation and set up the Young People's Program.

The Gawler Foundation

The Gawler Foundation has assisted many thousands of adults improve the quality of their life and survive cancer, since the Foundation's inception in 1981. The Foundation helps people manage

their illness by applying the principles of relaxation, meditation, a positive state of mind, good diet and nutrition. The range of services includes residential programs, cancer support groups and meditation groups, available at the Foundation's base in Yarra Junction and in Malvern,

near the city of Melbourne.

Dr Ian Gawler, therapeutic and executive director of the Foundation, discovered many years ago that our bodies have a natural, inherent capacity to heal. He was diagnosed with osteogenic sarcoma (bone cancer) and subsequently had his right leg amputated in January 1975. Secondaries in his lungs appeared within six months and he was given a prognosis of two weeks to live. He developed his own self-help program of health and healing, and eventually opened a residential retreat, which continues to offer hope and direction to many others. He has been in remission for over twenty-two years.

In April this year, the Foundation launched the inaugural "Health Connection" Program. It offers a five-day residential for young people affected by cancer, accompanied by their caregivers and other family members. Everyone gets involved, learning the principles and applying the techniques of the self-help program in an atmosphere of fun, participation and outdoor activities. The program is tailor-made for young people with direct focus on supporting and optimising any conventional medical treatment the young people may be undertaking. The Program is integrated with sessions of art therapy.

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Five specialists, guest speakers and a team of volunteer support workers staff the Health Connection. A safe environment is provided, where feelings and issues related to the participant's illness can be shared and discussed with others in a similar situation. As the Program Coordinator I think the greatest reward is seeing the young people gaining so much support through sharing their experiences with contemporaries. To watch a child suffering from cancer is devastating, yet so much strength is achieved as the families gain understanding of their children's emotions and the children grow more comfortable in voicing them.

First things first

The first program was met with enthusiasm and delight. Each family was greeted and offered assistance to settle in. The group was formed, stories were shared, tears were shed and some initial fears fell away. A sense of hope for a new and different way filled the room and a space for healing was created. An art therapy session of Body Tracing followed. Everyone had their body traced onto a large sheet of paper, and filled in the tracing with colour and pictures to portray a current expression of themselves.

The entire group shared breakfast, group meditation, massage, sessions on nutrition, diet and a challenging ropes course. Jokes were shared around a bonfire, the young people went on a sherpa-walk and there was even a visit from some clowns! The segment entitled the "Power of Laughter" was enjoyed by all and became a sure highlight of the week!

The Program provides an opportunity to learn through direct participation and from others' experience. Some sessions involve the young people working independently from their caregivers to focus on age-appropriate learning. Siblings are encouraged to share their experiences and the ever-demanding role of the caregiver is acknowledged, with discussion on supportive ways of caring for the carer.

The next Art Therapy session gave each person a simple yet effective opportunity to explore their inner life a little further. Everyone was asked to draw a picture of their cancer (or the cancer in their family). The following sequence of drawings depicted the specific location of the cancer and what each person thought may assist in the healing process. There were many and varied drawings from

this section, from love hearts and rays of sunshine, to space invaders, robots and lasers. Finally a picture of a healthy, cancer-free body is drawn. This completes the series. These drawings are taken into the meditation session and used in the guided meditation to set up the founda-

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tion for the series of powerful visualisation meditations used during the rest of the week. Each person takes these tools away with them to include in their meditations at home, once the residential is complete.

The first group of three families shared a very special week together. At the time of the first Program, seventeen year old Steve from NSW, joined by his Mum, showed amazing strength and determination after suffering a stroke just six weeks beforehand. Sixteen year old Emily, with her Mum, blossomed during a challenging week and thirteen year old Mark was accompanied by both his parents and his younger brother, Tim. The Program numbers grew for the second program, with each group collectively facing many challenges and experiencing many rewards.

Through the experience of living with cancer, each young person, without exception, had discovered the true value of life. Lasting friendships were made and each group departed from The Gawler Foundation with new insight, practical ways to apply their newfound knowledge and feeling much more able to cope with the illness in their lives.

In the past, people seem to have found out about self-help options, and the Gawler Foundation in particular, late rather than early in their disease process. The Foundation's aim is to change that. The more people who know about the program and all it has to offer, the more likely the information will reach those in

need. The art therapy component complements the Program as it provides an honest window to the inner state of the individual and makes way to support open lines of communication, which is imperative in any healing process.

My work is focused on the on-going development of the Program, with the primary aim to help families develop and sustain optimal conditions for health, healing and peace in family life. I am currently in a position to offer support and a new way of approach to many families, through the Program. That in itself is very rewarding. When I stand back and consider the journey I have travelled, and continue to travel, I feel humbled by the opportunities and accomplishments. There is so much more ground yet to cover, but in the meantime, I have made one young person's dream come true!

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