

A whole new palette

Art therapy classes encourage artistic and emotional success

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Emotions lingering in the minds of young artists are revealed throughout the halls of Butterfield Youth Services in paintings they created during therapy.

This type of healing treatment is known as art therapy, where students can rid their minds of anger or pain and concentrate on being successful and creative.

Although art therapy has been practiced at BYS for more than 30 years, art therapist Jerry Carton said it has continued to bring youth out of negative moods and steer them away from bad behavior.

The newest art therapy class, which involves nothing but painting or painting-related efforts, has only been offered for about a year, Carton said. However, BYS provides projects and classes for all age and ability levels.

"It's amazing how fast kids will progress if given the opportunity," he said. "Bad behavior and creativity just don't mix and kids are naturally creative."

The results of art therapy can be seen on a daily basis at BYS, Carton said. For example, one teenage girl, Whitney, walked into the art room so upset she was crying, but about an hour and a half later, she was smiling and presenting a newly-created acrylic painting of bold colors and shapes. As she began to brush colors across the canvas, her demeanor and feelings changed. But Whitney wasn't surprised at that. She knew she'd feel better once she started expressing herself through strokes of creativity.

"Painting gets my madness out," Whitney said. "I was crying and all mad when I came but I'm fine now. I'm happy now."

Whitney also knew that what Carton had been teaching her wasn't just art, but a way to deal with emotions.

"I knew it was therapy," she said. "But I like to paint, and when I do what I like, I just get happy."

As Carton said, it's virtually impossible to dwell in anger when being creative.

Another aspect of art therapy involves the meaning behind certain images and colors. Carton said his students' work contains messages - their paintings speak.

Heather, who came to the art room to paint last week, began an oil painting she called "Meaningless Expression." With streaks of purple and white and hues of blue and green, she began her creation with colored handprints on a black canvas.

"It just relieves stress so easily," Heather said. "It's like, here's a mushroom someone painted, but it's not really a mushroom. It's your whole day's feelings. This black spot may mean something, or this color symbolizes how you felt when your crush asked you out."

Working beside Heather, using her own canvas and oil paints, Jackie put the finishing touches on "Sunset on Taiga," which showed

a landscape of a snowy climate in the north.

"I was drawing this in my art book and I just felt like learning to shade," Jackie said. "I didn't really even plan it. I just learned as I worked."

That's the way it works for many of Carton's students. He teaches them to stretch their own canvases and encourages them to paint whatever they want. Some start with cartoons while others make a reproduction of images in their minds. Carton also allows students to recreate or personalize photos they find on the Internet.

While the idea is to teach students how to express themselves, Carton also wants them to learn the basics of painting on canvas. The majority of his students have never dealt with anything other than "kiddie" paints or had the opportunity to work on such large projects.

As paintings are finished, they are displayed on the walls at BYS for everyone, including visitors, to see. After a few weeks, the paintings are taken down, but prints are always left up for display in picture frames.

Another unique aspect of the class, and one that Carton said makes it even more rewarding for the young artists, is that they can sell their work. At this time of year, many of the prints are turned into greeting cards.

"They sell them right off the wall," Carton said. "People will come visit and see something they like and the child can determine what the price is."

However, Carton said he always makes sure the artist isn't underpricing the work. Prints usually sell for \$15 and while the artists must cover the cost of the mat and the frame, they are allowed to keep the rest of the money.

"They've probably sold \$150 worth of prints in the past few months," Carton said. "And virtually none of our children have painted before."

Working with students to help them succeed in their efforts, Carton said he simply wants to introduce them to serious painting media. He also wants to see them going about their projects in a planned, systematic way so they will be able to reach a level of success.

"The idea is to teach them the rudiments of painting on canvas," he said. "I want the child to be able to leave here and be able to paint as least expensively as possible and that's only possible when they do it like an artist and make it themselves. That's why I teach them to stretch the canvas themselves."