

For art's sake

Local nonprofit brings art therapy to Fort Worth canvas

Robert Francis - January 23, 2006



For Jane Avila, her life has become her work. As the founder and director of the Art Station, a non-profit organization that offers individual and group art therapy and community programs, Avila is sharing the healing power of art, which has significantly shaped her own life.

“I’d always believed in art therapy, but going through the process was the only way I experienced any relief and I was under care of a therapist and psychiatrist. But all the therapy in the world didn’t do it for me. I had to get underneath all that for the healing to begin,” she said.

After the suicide of her 14-year-old son, Jonathan, in 1993, Avila sank into a deep depression. “I was a vegetable, really,” she said.

A social worker with a degree in art from Trinity University, Avila had long had an interest in art therapy. In the midst of her depression, a flyer landed in her mailbox offering art therapy classes at the Art Therapy Institute in Dallas. “I called the woman who was teaching the class and told her bluntly that I was a mess – that I might break down in class – but I’d love to take the class. Thankfully, she said OK,” said Avila.

The class did what no pills, therapy, or counseling could and set Avila off on a new venture. Around the same time, her husband, John Avila, purchased Thos. S. Byrne General Contractors, and they moved from Plano to Fort Worth.

Heal she did, and with that healing came the eventual founding of the Art Station in September 2004.

“According to our mission statement, ‘our mission is to provide a safe and encouraging environment where art making can be used to promote personal growth, uplift our hearts and help heal our minds and bodies.’ I think that says it pretty well,” said Avila. “Where we’re unique is that we do this therapy work through art. It is kind of surprising that in this community that justifiably is proud of its artists and art museums, art therapy is relatively rare.”

Housed in a historic fire station built in 1922 and located near the south-side medical district, the Art Station has provided approximately 330 hours of mental health art therapy to more than 65 individuals and families. The Art Station has worked with a number of local schools and non-profit agencies to develop programs, train staff and volunteers and provide supportive art therapy and art enrichment activities. The group has provided approximately 3200 hours of community programs to 375 children and adults living in Tarrant and surrounding counties, according to Matthew Avila, community development director for the Art Station and Jane’s son.

The organization is now working with the Fort Worth Independent School District's Family Resource Center (FRC) to provide clinical services to children referred by the FRC. "We've worked with several other local agencies like Tarrant County Mental Health/Mental Retardation, Lena Pope, and Catholic Charities and the like; and we were recently able to include the Art Station," said Michael Steinert, coordinator of community and family resources at FWISD.

Steinert, who has a background in art and play therapies, said he immediately saw value in the Art Station's offerings. "We haven't been doing this long and I think I can safely say we've seen some results, according to the reports I get from families. It's a really great way to reach children who otherwise don't communicate their problems well. It really breaks down some barriers that couldn't be broken down otherwise," he said.

According to the American Art Therapy Association (AATA), art therapy became a distinct profession in the 1940s when psychiatrists became interested in artwork created by their patients. Many then began offering art therapy along with traditional therapies. Currently art therapy is used in many health care facilities and in individual and group psychology, psychiatry and counseling sessions. The AATA currently has 4,500 members in the U.S. "However, no schools in Texas offer a degree in the field, so there are not many licensed and trained therapists in the area," said Avila.

Art therapy has proven its viability, said Avila. "After 9-11, there was a call for art therapists in New York City because it was found to be so beneficial to children. The situation was so overwhelming for many of these children – seeing the buildings fall over and over – that they couldn't handle it by traditional therapies," she said.

Because of the local response to its offerings, the Art Station recently added a second full-time art therapist, Heidi Tournoux-Hanshaw.

According to Matthew Avila, the Art Station's annual operating budget is approximately \$103,300. About 30 percent of the budget is paid through client fees, contracts and other program-related revenue which amounted to \$31,000 in 2005. Remaining costs have been paid through grants and other donations. Thos. S. Byrne and the Byrne Foundation have been major contributors to the Art Station, he said.

Through the art therapy Avila received a route to healing, and the move to Fort Worth gave her the chance for a fresh start. "No one here knew our history, knew what had happened. There were simply too many memories and reminders at our old home," she said. Avila also credits the move and her husband's commitment to her healing. "After a suicide, the rate of divorce among couples skyrockets. That would have been an even larger tragedy, and John and I were committed to not let that happen," she said.

Once Avila got the non-profit status for her organization, she began searching for a location for the work. "When I walked into this building and saw the large garage, I knew this was the place," she said. Avila also wanted a place that was accessible. "We're right near the bus line and the area is probably the most multicultural in the city, so we can serve a very diverse population," she said.

While the old fire station provided a location for the Art Station, the building itself needed some therapy of its own. In the early 1900s, fire stations were built to blend in with the surrounding neighborhood, so the structure is constructed in the arts and crafts style typical of the 1900 to 1925 era.

The subtle grandeur of the building had fallen into disrepair however, as a tailor shop and then a recording studio had taken up residence since the fire station was closed. “Thankfully we had the resources of Byrne or it never would have happened,” said Avila of the building’s revitalization. For its efforts, Byrne won the 2005 Preservation Texas Rehabilitation Award.

Aside from some historical fire station items, the space is decorated with various pieces of art primarily from former art therapy patients. In one room, several of Jane Avila’s own works are displayed, primarily mandalas, which are drawings meant to be a reflection of one’s consciousness at the moment of drawing. They were often used by Carl Jung, one of the founders of modern psychology.

As the non-profit organization was being set up, Avila also began to seek out advice as to how to set up the group. “I had always worked in a clinical setting in a large organization. I really had very few business skills,” she said. Someone who did, however, was her son, Matthew. He has a Ph.D. in behavioral medicine and was then working at the Maryland Psychiatric Research Center. Avila began to consult him on the phone. “The phone calls kept getting longer and longer,” he said.

Eventually, the idea was broached for Matthew to return home and work with the organization. “I was starting to itch for something with more impact. I have a knack for raising money and writing grants, and once they find that out in an academic setting, they sort of chain you to a desk,” he said.

Here, he said he feels like he is making a difference. “You can see it in front of you. In an academic setting you sometimes wonder if that million dollars you raised is really having an impact. It is, but it is so far down the line, you don’t always get to see it,” he said.

He is also learning a lot about his own family. “If you want a really interesting experience, try setting up a non-profit organization with your mother,” he said.

Jane Avila has many plans for the future of the Art Station. “I’d like this to become a viable community resource long after I’m gone. I’m hoping to establish this as a place for art therapy to take root in the community,” said Avila.

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