

Hope Street's Therapeutic Art and Crafts Program

Jude Steward, Boost Specialist Practitioner, Hope Street Youth and Family Services

Sitting together over dinner I watched her — her head lowered towards the table, no eye contact. Staff and young people chatted around her, trying to include her in the conversation by making small talk and using inclusive language but still there was little acknowledgement, only slight glimpses of a hidden sadness emanating from the depths of her vulnerability. Catching her eye for a moment I smiled. She smiled back. I seized this brief and timely opportunity to ask her if she would like to have a chat with me one on one. She nodded and followed me to the office.

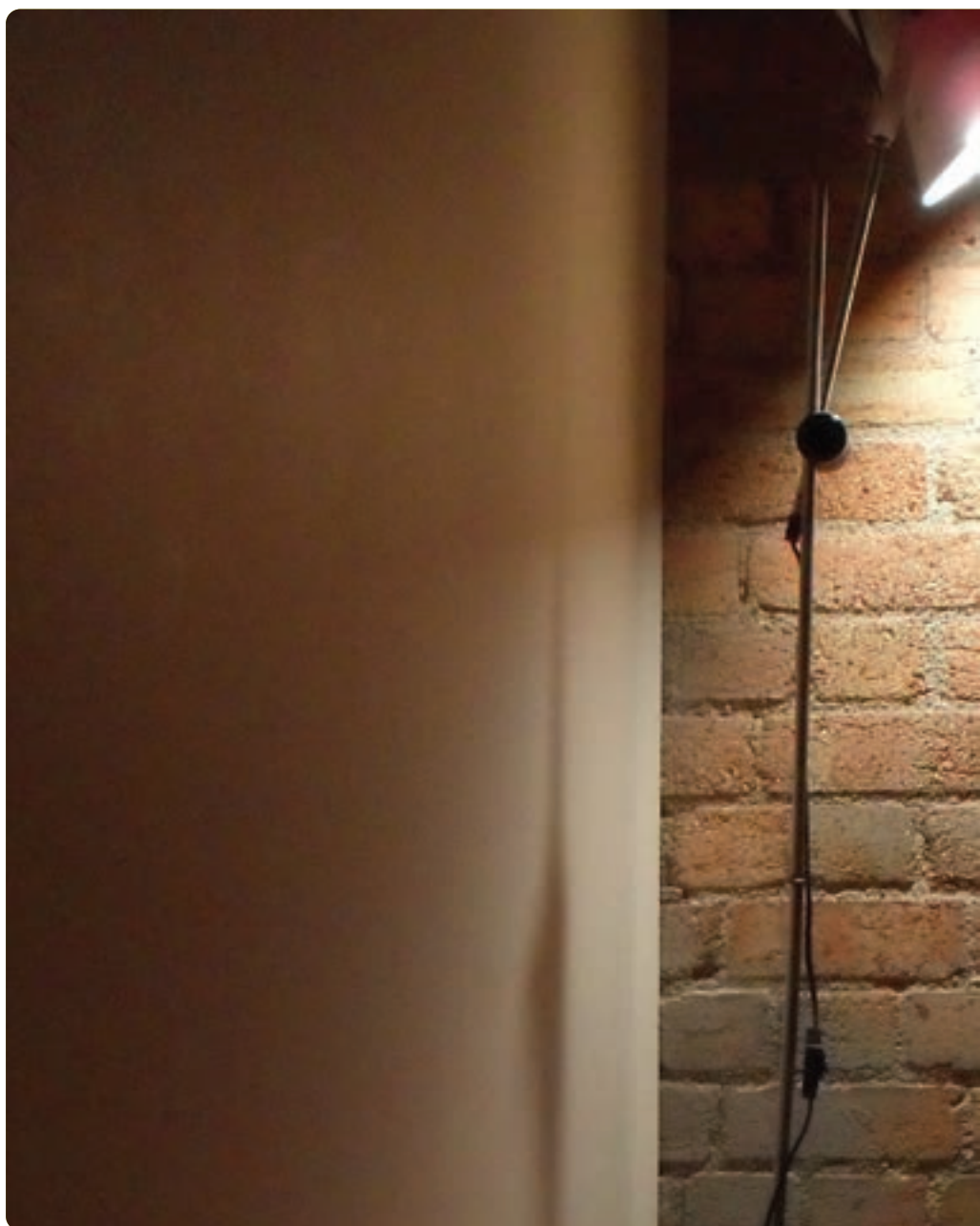
Sitting in the chair she started biting her nails. She told me that it was her first time in a refuge and that she was scared. She told me that she has no family and that she has never been good at making friends. She said that people always misunderstood her and accused her of being rude and cold. I could sense that there was so much more lurking under the surface but the priority for me, the nighttime support worker, was to have her settle into the refuge safely for the night, to ease her anxiety and to lay the foundations of a trusting environment. A place where she could feel safe.

I asked if she liked to colour in. She giggled — then a smile and told me she used to love it as a kid but she hadn't done it for years because it was only for young kids. I smiled back telling her this old girl is certainly not a kid and I love colouring in! Instant rapport. We moved to the kitchen area and pulled out some templates, gel pens and coloured pencils.

Within 20 minutes there were five of us colouring. The young person was introduced to the other young residents as they each appeared and joined in. Before long they were all

chatting, laughing and admiring each other's impeccable skills. Various abilities, ages, cultural and religious backgrounds were represented and each person talented in so many different ways — and it was those various points of difference that brought them together — immediately and around a simple art activity.

As a result of this single, wonderful interaction four years ago my colleagues and I at Hope Street Youth and Family Services developed our evening Art/Craft Program designed to provide an opportunity for young people to relax before retiring to their rooms for the evening. The program



encompasses various forms of art- and craft-making according to the young people's interests. Subsequently, the program has incorporated some mindfulness techniques into the workshops in order to assist young people in developing self-awareness, self-regulation and self-care.

My own professional background encompasses working within the Therapeutic Model of Care provision for the Department of Health and Human Services in Child Protection. I did this work for eight years. I discovered, on moving over to the homelessness sector, that my skills in this area were transferable. Being trauma informed and experienced in therapeutic assessment, case management and care planning served as valuable

tools that would greatly assist me in working with vulnerable young people who are homeless.

I recently had the pleasure of attending an Art Therapy Masterclass with La Trobe University at the National Gallery of Victoria. The two-day workshop showcased the work of Yayoi Kusama and explored the role art making can play in improving mental health, wellbeing and in therapy.

The workshop highlighted the opportunities that present when art is used as a conduit between a caregiver/therapist and a young person and it explored the impact art making has when used as a therapeutic activity. Proven benefits for the young person include: positive engagement without the

pressure of eye contact; providing a relaxed space for problem solving; generating optimism; making perseverance fun; and experiencing a sense of accomplishment when the project is finished. I strongly believe, however, that the greatest impact is found in the ability for the young person to build supportive self-care strategies into the art making space.

Teaching young people techniques related to mindfulness, grounding and self-regulation gives them positive tools that they can implement any time. In the relaxing atmosphere of the creative space young people can talk freely and converse in an open exchange, often allowing them to address subjects that are difficult to share.

The healing and restorative benefits on the human brain of using art making to address trauma are now a focus of international research. In 2008 Art Therapy was employed to address traumatic effects experienced by teachers and students following the Sichuan earthquake and, closer to home in 2017, the Victorian State Government funded a mobile art therapy program to address the needs of children from families experiencing domestic violence in regional Victoria.

Art therapy and art making has been a major activity and approach in responding to young people who have experienced trauma and come into Hope Street's programs. Hope Street supports practices across all programs that encourage the young person's journey to be looked at through the artist's lens, through self-expression and art making as an integrated practice response.

Art, relaxation and mindfulness are skills for life and are gifts that many young people are unlikely to receive in their day to day activities.

Many young people regularly express their thanks and appreciation to Hope Street for giving them the opportunity to develop their skills and incorporate new techniques and strategies into their lives.

Facilitating such a program is an honor and a privilege for which I am truly grateful.

