

CITY ON A HILL PRESS

Therapeutic Self-Expression

By **Gianmaria Franchini**

If you look hard enough, you might find Bill Manchester near the Hahn Student Services building or McHenry Library. Rake in hand, rugged overalls hanging loosely from his broad frame, the soft-spoken groundskeeper tends after UC Santa Cruz's stunning campus. With the same paternal, unassuming air, Manchester also looks after a collection of art tucked away in the Graduate Student Commons. The assorted drawings, sketches, and acrylic paintings that make up his charge are eccentric and fascinating in nature. Childlike, skillful, incomprehensible, and surprisingly normal in turn, they are made by mental health patients from the Santa Cruz behavioral health agency, Front Street Inc.

Manchester is hesitant when speaking into a tape recorder. After a skeptical glance at the contraption before him, and an admission of feeling "a little intimidated," he commits to a full-on interview. For 13 years, he's been running a one-man art therapy venture called "Art With Bill" at Front Street Inc.'s residence homes. With approval from the Graduate Student Commons Governance Board, Manchester has displayed his students' art on campus for five years.

He is proud of the work he has evoked from what he calls "a wonderful and engaging group of what we would understand as the mentally ill: from the schizophrenics to the rapidly firing manic depressives." When describing several pieces of his students' art his face lights up, and his speech becomes punctuated with admiration.

“This one,” he said, pointing to a sketch of a man standing near the hood of a car, “is done by a man who used to be a mechanic. I’m not necessarily privy to all particular diagnoses, but we are very aware that we are dealing with exceedingly challenged people. So, for him to apply principles of perspective to drawing is ... fantastic. You have everything from the effort to the accidentally exceptional. It’s also very, very beautiful.”

Manchester isn’t a trained therapist. His background, with beginnings at UC Riverside, is in religion; at one point he was director of religious education with the Archdiocese of San Francisco. But after discovering a latent talent in illustration, he realized he could support himself in a limited manner through drawing. Staying true to his generous personality, and perhaps his religious inclination, he wanted to give something back.

“I’m not a therapist by any means, but I invented this. I don’t know how I did. I have the privilege to go into four of these residences, and hang, and teach art. Some of these people are my best friends,” he said. “With all of my Jesuit training, this was a radiance.”

“Art With Bill” can’t officially be called “art therapy,” simply because it lacks therapists with requisite training. But his class is part of an extensive local network of grassroots, largely volunteer-led programs that use art as therapeutic self-expression for patients that range from the mentally ill, to the elderly, to survivors of sexual abuse. Locally, the programs are an excellent example of the functional role art can play within a community.

“In my opinion, mental illness is handled in this county better than almost anywhere in the U.S.,” Manchester said. “It’s a showcase — we have an opportunity in Santa Cruz that people in San Francisco and elsewhere don’t have. That is to provide opportunities for homeless,

those that are broken, those who fell through the cracks, to come through the system.”

Because of a commitment to the arts and a healthy volunteer spirit, Santa Cruz is especially receptive to therapeutic art. Maria Rodriguez is the executive director of the Survivor’s Healing Center, and one member of the two-person full-time staff that runs the 20-year-old not-for-profit organization. The healing center’s goal is to break adult survivors of child sexual abuse from isolation and self-inflicted shame through weekly group sessions. The sessions, offered separately for men, women, Latinas, and transgendered people, use different forms of expressive media to help with healing processes. Although most of the session leaders are trained therapists, they are also volunteers.

“The work we do is expressive and visual — the survivors work through their issues by expressing themselves,” Rodriguez said. “They write, paint, they work with clay. We also showcase expressive art evenings, where survivors go up on stage, and perform or recite original poetry, song, and dance.”

While Rodriguez understands that the power of expression can be a key to overcoming highly traumatic experiences, she also believes that on a strictly practical level, making art can be a positive substitute for unhealthy coping mechanisms.

“Some people don’t know how sensitive these issues can be, and we try to break that silence, because that silence comes with a lot of shame,” she said. “The sessions and our events bring out [survivors’] anger and their courage. One thing I always tell my clients is to develop healthy coping skills. To draw, or tap into the creative process even without much skill, even just seeing an exhibit, is healthy.”

Like Manchester, Rodriguez believes that the local environment is conducive to programs like hers.

“As a very small nonprofit, we’re very blessed,” she said. “The cities of Santa Cruz, Capitola, and Watsonville and the county fund us. This is the perfect place for an organization like ours because the community is really open. We get phone calls from Texas, Chicago, e-mails from Germany, the U.K. — people saying ‘I’m a survivor, I don’t have any programs like this where I’m from.’ [For them] the lack of recognition of their problems gives them a real lack of validation.”

A sense of self-worth is probably the most valuable form of assistance local art therapy programs offer their patients. It’s a very fundamental concept, that acting out basic creative impulses can aid in healing processes or return some sanity to stressful — or even pathological — lives. In a strictly medical sense, encouraging people with disabilities to make art can also help restore lost or diminished motor skills.

Sondra Cohelen, a local artist, art teacher, and Ageless Art program coordinator, works with the elderly at residence homes through the Family Service Agency of the Central Coast. Ageless Art recruits professional artists to lead and encourage home residents to create art. Cohelen has seen a wide range of positive results stemming from her program’s efforts, some of which are very well-suited to her “students” health problems.

“The word therapy is a broad term: art brings happiness, enjoyment, it awakens people. There is a great deal of pleasure it sparks,” Cohelen said. “It also gives individuals a sense of self-satisfaction and accomplishment. It’s been documented how it helps people with Alzheimer’s and aches and pains. There is a whole emotional range to art, so using it can get someone to remember things, or even to become coordinated physically after one has had a stroke, can be very effective.”

Sue Partington lives at the residence home where Cohelen does her

work. She was eager to speak about Ageless Art, and very proud of a collage she made that found its way onto the cover of an art book. Some of her art has also been shown at the Santa Cruz Art and History Museum.

“I may be 82, but I’m still learning. I’ve been beading, painting, doing collages, and writing poems. It’s really stimulating and I really look forward to [Cohelen’s] class,” she said. “It was a whole new challenge. What’s interesting to me is I never know what I’m going to come up with. But [the class] makes it come out of you.”

According to the Northern California Art Therapy Association (NorCATA) mission statement, the use of art therapy “implies that the creative process can be a means both of reconciling emotional conflicts and of fostering self-awareness and personal growth.” Although Cohelen, Rodriguez, and Manchester don’t hold art therapy licenses, their work makes use of that implication to the fullest extent.

NorCATA’s mission statement continues with a more concrete definition of the role of art therapists: “[Art therapists] integrate training and experience in art and therapy with theories of human behavior, a knowledge of visual symbol production, an understanding of normal and abnormal behavior and development and training in interventions and methods, applying a holistic approach to treatment.” Even if local interest and use of art therapy is burgeoning, there are only a handful of schools on the West Coast that cater programs in the field. Kate Avraham, who leads art sessions with Ageless Art and is pursuing a master’s degree in art therapy from Marylhurst University in Oregon, bridges the gap between local, unofficial programs and those operating under established standards. She holds more technical knowledge of the workings of art therapy.

“You don’t necessarily have to be a professional artist, but you have to

be familiar with all different media,” she said. “I think one of the most difficult aspects of art therapy is matching medium with client need. Diagnostically it’s very important that you guide that process. There are certain symbols and colors you’re taught to use and interpret. The goal of that is building trust with patients so they can open up emotionally.”

Avraham holds bachelor’s degrees in art history and psychology from UC Riverside. Julia Boekelheide is a former UCSC student enrolled in a Marriage and Family Art Therapy master’s program, with a focus on fine arts, at Dame De Namur University in Belmont, CA. She vouched for art therapy’s effectiveness and believes that therapists have been integrating it into their work more regularly simply because it works. “I’m a true believer,” she said. “I think it’s a really important way for people who are not capable of being verbal to communicate, particularly young people, or those who need to recover from being deeply traumatized. I think [art therapy and traditional therapy] are intertwined. Because every individual case is different, it’s important to incorporate therapies when needed.”

Part of the reason the local environment readily adopts programs like Cohelen’s and Rodriguez’s is due to the work of the Cultural Council of Santa Cruz County (CCSCC). Its members work with neighboring art councils, artists and museums to integrate art into the local economy and community. Nabil Ghachem, CCSCC grants programs coordinator, believes art is therapeutic on all levels — something akin to an escape from the quotidian nightmares that face everyone on a day-to-day basis.

“Are the murals downtown a form of art therapy?” he wrote to City on a Hill Press via e-mail. “What about gathering together to witness a live performance? Artists often say that art is what keeps them from losing

their sanity — I know that's true for me!"