

Healing journeys are shared through Hospice art program



By Brock Weir

People who have been diagnosed with a life-threatening illness often can't find the words to express just what they are feeling, but with a canvas in front of them and a brush or even a crayon in hand, a new and vital conversation can open up.

Now, people who have participated in Doane House Hospice's Art Therapy Program are sharing their stories, and the stories of their loved ones, in a new collection of their work, on display now at the Aurora Public Library's Colleen Abbott Gallery.

Doane House, the Newmarket-based hospice which provides a variety of supports for individuals coping with a life-threatening illness and their families instituted its art therapy program in 2001. Operated by specially trained art therapists, it was initially focused on serving the needs of children who had a parent or grandparent dealing with a life-threatening illness or were experiencing a recent bereavement.

It was designed to give the kids a non-threatening atmosphere to express what they felt. From those early days, the program has only grown, expanding to people of all ages who continue to reap the benefits of art.

"It is very important for people to understand that art therapy is a therapy and it's not somebody just doing arts and crafts," explains Juliet Irish, Executive Director of Doane House. "If you are going to open up Pandora's Box, you really do need to know how to help that person moving forward and how to close that box in a healthy way. You need to make sure you have the right people around who are trained in doing that. Often, [our clients'] first reaction is I don't know how to paint, or I don't know how to draw, but that's not what this is about. It's about putting down your feelings using colours. It could be that someone is using a lot of red because they are angry. It can be abstract, it doesn't have to necessarily be a particular tree or flower. The interesting thing is it is amazing to see how once the client starts using these things what comes out from it. You will find people who have never picked up a paint brush in their life and they are producing things that are amazing."

Some of them have gone into art classes afterwards, fully appreciating the value art brought to their lives, while others were inspired to pursue work as art therapists themselves.

As fulfilling as it is, however, it all comes at a cost. While the programs are free of charge to Doane House clients, funding is required to keep it going. To that end, they had another stroke of genius: some of their clients wanted to show and sell their art to raise money for and awareness of the program.

"By doing this, it tells a story of journeys people are going through which can help other people in a similar situation," says Ms. Irish. "It gives great awareness because then people get to know a little bit about art therapy and how it can support, but I think it also takes away the scariness from the concept that hospice is about end of life and that isn't the case; hospice is about living before you die or being able to support somebody who has anticipatory grief or bereavement. It is a great awareness when people see our exhibition in the community."

It also provides a significant degree of satisfaction to these emerging artists of all ages. Participants found it validated their journey completely and instilled a sense of pride in the fact a product of an unhappy situation can help others and, when they can make a sale of art prints available in a variety of shapes and sizes, it only serves to underscore that artistic journey.

For some, the artistic journey can start with a simple ice-breaking instruction from the instructor, such as "Think of yourself as a

tree. What does that tree look like to you today??

?As they are doing that, it can blossom, it can grow, and there might be roots coming out,? says Ms. Irish. ?Everyone has their own picture on how that might look. As the weeks follow, there isn't a directive, it is how you feel. How was your week this week? Is there anything that came out that you would like to address? They might put that down on their canvas. By the end of their eight weeks, all their art work is put together so you see the journey they have been on.

?Part of that group is when they have done their art work, if they want to talk about their work to the group they can choose to do that. If they choose not to, that is fine too ? but you find there is a lot of sharing that goes on because it is all part of that healing process. At the end of the eight weeks they see all of their artwork and see how they have moved forward on that journey and it is pretty awesome to see. Through art, they are able to communicate with any age on whatever journey they happen to be on.?

The Doane House Hospice Art Exhibit can be seen now at the Aurora Public Library through January 22. For more on the program, visit www.doanehospice.org.