

Art with Heart brings out the colours of life



By Brock Weir

During her recovery on the road to mental wellness, Liza Cadawas found she was having a hard time expressing herself. She felt 'stalled' and at a crossroads, but once she found some paints and a few pencil crayons in hand, she felt a new world opening up to her and that roadblock to self-expression slowly lifting away.

The results of this journey – and the work of many other members of the Canadian Mental Health Association's Art Therapy program – can now be found on the wall of the Aurora Public Library's Colleen Abbot Gallery in the exhibition 'Art with Heart.' The Aurora-based Canadian Mental Health Association's 'Art with Heart' group captures the power of paint, pastels and various other media in the work they do to aid recovery – and it is all captured in the vivid and expressive show.

'I found in the group I didn't really have to say much,' recalls Liza. 'I was given some paint, some pencil crayons and very simple directives and I could put myself right into the art itself. I am not an artist, I had never done this before, but when I started two years ago I thought it was so much easier for me to draw – even abstract – to express myself, express the feeling I was having, the thoughts that were hard for me to speak into the work. That is what drew me to the group and what made me stay with the group.'

Once she began expressing herself artistically, Liza says she felt 'very clear.' She didn't feel constrained in any way and, at the same time, she felt very encouraged by the group as a whole.

'I surprised myself every week,' says Liza of what she created. 'From my perspective, it is surprising that I feel more like an artist than when I first started. I think that has been the feedback from everyone else, that I might have some kind of artistic creativity I didn't know was there.'

'Self-esteem is always an issue for me and I think that my own personal self-esteem has definitely increased and has been built up through this regular group alone, really and truly because of the encouragement in the group, the ability to just freely express and not be worried about what anyone is going to say about it.'

Within the program, there are opportunities for members of the group to share their work and provide feedback on what the others have created. You are able to do so as you feel comfortable, but it is never something that is forced. Liza says participants have the ability to share how a particular instructor's directive was interpreted on the canvas or paper and see how others are interpreting the same.

'You have the ability to share how you interpreted it, and there's feedback on what everyone else might see, how my particular process has changed, or something that looks completely different from what I intended,' she says.

Liza is showing two pieces in the Library show. The first is one created around the idea of how she sees herself as a person, with the words 'I Am' very much front and centre. It an illustration of how she has started to develop a better sense of who she is – 'I am a little bit more powerful than I thought I was, I am more expressive than I thought I was' – and a second piece, also exploring the issue of self-esteem, inspired by the work of Vincent Van Gogh.

Van Gogh, she says, wanted to prove his art was worth something to the world and, through Liza's own work, she is proving her worth to herself.

“I just want people to have a feeling,” she says of how she would like her own art interpreted. “It doesn’t have to be someone who struggles with mental wellness, it can be anybody who needs any type of healing. It is important to show just how healing it can be and how important it is for our recovery and our journey to recovery. It has helped and it helps us express ourselves again in ways that are sometimes hard to speak.

“If someone is looking for a form of therapy that might be a bit different for them, give it a try. You don’t have to be an artist, obviously, and you don’t have to know anything about form, line, or any of those artistic things. It can be a safe space for someone. The environment is just so supportive and I think that’s what helps us so much.”

The “Art with Heart” exhibition is now on at the Aurora Public Library through April 15. For more information on the Canadian Mental Health Association and the services it provides in the community, including art therapy, visit www.cmha.ca.