

Making people feel better

By ART NADLER
SUN Staff Writer

Joyce Straus believes that art can make people feel better. As an art therapist, she also feels that anyone with the right frame of mind can be a poet, writer, or maybe an artist.

"It's a challenge to make people think and re-evaluate their behavior," said Straus, art therapist with Valley Hospital. For the past three years of her 14 years as an artist, Straus has been helping those who suffer psychological disorders reshape opinions of themselves.

For two hours a day, Straus instructs hospital and private-practice patients in drawing, painting, fiber designing, ceramics, tapestry and basket weaving.

"We may talk of the value of a blank canvas, or the value of choosing colors," the artist said. "I tell them to do things for fun and not worry about turning out a masterpiece. They allow their depression to disappear for the moment."

Straus encourages her students not to give up on a project. Her students gain tremendous self-esteem by working on art projects, she said.

Once Straus brought some African masks to class and engaged the patients in discussing their own feelings about the masks. After awhile, she instructed her students to draw what the masks meant, and one student created a picture with a happy mask face about to be affixed to a sad face.

The man said this was his positive attitude being used to mask his depression, Straus explained. This showed that the man was learning how to change his attitude about himself and how others would perceive him with a happier face, she added.

William E. Kunhart, a clinical neuropsychologist at Valley Hospital, has been working with Straus since she began at the hospital.

"She's able to draw people out (of their depression) who aren't able to do things on their own," he said.

Kunhart believes that art therapy is a very important instrument in treating mental disorders. Through patients' artworks, he is able to see their inner feelings.

"Their personality and problems are projected in their artwork," Straus said. "It (art therapy) is relaxation therapy so they can be treated more successfully."

Kunhart explained that it is easier to reach a patient who is relaxed and that relation lowers the anxiety level. Many progressive psychologists are using art therapy today, he said, although it only gained recognition within the last two decades.

"Everyone is responsible for his or her behavior," Straus said, explaining her approach to her students. "They (patients) learn to never give up and regain their self-esteem by working on art projects. Patients realize themselves that while they are doing what they are doing in art, they feel better."



Joyce Straus is shown, above, with some of her art therapy supplies. The drawing at right was created by a student who said his positive attitude was being used to mask his depression. Straus believes art can make people feel better and re-evaluate their behavior.



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