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Regional

Gussie Klorer uses art to help children heal

Many artists, such as Frida Kahlo or Vincent Van Gogh, used art to deal with their physical or mental ailments. Today, art is widely used as a means to understand and heal people — particularly children — with physical or emotional trauma.

One expert in that field is Gussie Klorer. Born in St. Louis, Mo., she received her bachelor's degree from the University of Missouri, her master's in art therapy from George Washington University in Washington, D.C., and her doctorate, also in art therapy, from The Union Institute in Cincinnati, Ohio. For the past 21 years, she has been the director of the art therapy and counseling program at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville and looks upon art therapy as a form of communication.

"It is using art as the means of expression in a therapeutic relationship because many people don't have words for what they are feeling, particularly children," said Klorer.

One controversial issue involving children is the use of artwork to ascertain whether or not they are being abused.

"A lot of research has been done on that and the fact is that there is no particular sign that a child would draw in their artwork that can give you a diagnosis of sexual abuse," said Klorer, who has worked with cases of severe abuse and trauma.

"What is most interesting about it is that rarely do the children draw what happened," Klorer said. "Rather they put it in symbolically and the story that they tell is a metaphor for what really happened. You don't necessarily see really painful

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

pictures, but you might see something that is a metaphor for that pain for that child."

While she has dealt with many difficult cases, Klorer has had her share of successes.

"One of my favorite stories is a little girl that I started working with when she was four years old and she had been abandoned by her mother," Klorer said. "She went to a succession of foster homes and really wanted to attach to her foster family, but she couldn't betray her mother, even though her mother was the abuser. So she was in this conundrum because this family wanted to adopt her but she was really struggling. So I worked with her for four years and when she was eight years old, the legal things fell into place and she was ready to be adopted. One day, she came into art and told me that she wanted to make a sister." Klorer knew that the girl did not have a sister.

"Yet, she constructs this silly looking life-size doll out of Styrofoam and boxes," Klorer said. "And I had no idea what it meant, but it seemed very important to her. It was life-size and she took it home. Her foster mom called me and said 'Gussie, you won't believe what happened with the sister that she made. The sister watches me cook dinner, the sister sleeps by my bed at night, and the sister told me that she loved me.'

"And so what the child did was she created a

way to try out this new role. She really wanted to be adopted but she didn't know how, so she tried out this new role by making a life-size doll and she tried out saying things through the doll to the foster mom, and it was a really important part about their bonding."

Some time later the girl showed up at Klorer's clinic and started to decorate a coffee can with little pieces of paper. When Klorer asked her what she was making, the child replied, "We are making ashes. You know when somebody dies you have ashes and we are making my mom's ashes."

Her mom hadn't really died but this was her way of putting that to rest so that she could be adopted, Klorer explained.

With stories this compelling it is not surprising that many students are interested in becoming art therapists. "We are getting a lot more applicants," Klorer said. "It is very competitive to get into the program because we are the only show in town."

Klorer is also an author. Her book "Expressive Therapy with Troubled Children" conveys her philosophy of working with children.

"I think the beauty of art therapy is that kids don't know that they are in therapy," she said. "They have no idea that they are in therapy. They are just doing what comes naturally to them. They are creating and they are being expressive."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.



Shan Lu/SIUE

Klorer says kids' messages are sometimes hidden in metaphor.