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Regional

Goebel-Parker administers cure with art therapy

Art can be many things to many people, including providing healing and life enhancing experiences. If you don't believe this, just ask Shelly Goebel-Parker, art therapist.

Goebel-Parker was born in Fairfax, Va., and grew up in the Washington, D.C., area. She obtained her bachelor's degree in psychology from the University of Tennessee in Knoxville and her master's in social work from Washington University in St. Louis. Today she is an assistant professor in the department of art and design at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

In her many years of work, Goebel-Parker has used art in the support and help of personal development and healing. More specifically she has used it to deal with mental illness and also mental wellbeing. She said that any place where counselors or social workers can be found, there are oftentimes art therapists as well, indicating a broad and in-demand field. She has worked with both children and adults because she works with families as a whole. She has been a practitioner of the Reggio Emilia approach to art therapy, named after the schools in the northern Italian city of the same name.

"What I have really gleaned is a research approach and methods that they use that are very embedded in the way they teach," Goebel-Parker said. "That teaching is more about starting a fire than filling up a cup. And the difference is that they are very interested in how fire catches in a classroom and how learning becomes inspired and developed without the leading of a teacher but through more of the setting of the right environment and conditions and then the facilitation of the teacher."

Aldemaro Romero College Talk

She has worked with children as young as 4, but always within the family context. "I would work with this child for 40 minutes. This is in a private practice setting in an office, and I would work with the child for 40 minutes and then I would spend five minutes with mom in the waiting room," Goebel-Parker explained. "But I attribute most of the progress I made with that child and most of the change in her behavior to the five minutes that I spent with the mother. And I tried to talk to the mom about that as well. It was a connection between both things, that I was getting to know the child well enough that the mom could take in the information that I was trying to help her, and then the mom could also feel reinforced by some ideas and impressions that she had that she just didn't have the competence to carry out."

Sometimes she has dealt with more difficult situations. "I did work with a 5-year-old who was from another country and had very little English and that was really very interesting. He and I did some wonderful work together," she said. "I learned a lot about what made him afraid and about what he did to help himself take care of those fears. Between drawing and a mixture of very little language and a lot of gesture, we actually got a lot more work done than I would have supposed we could have without verbal language."

Goebel-Parker has been dealing more and more with children whose parents have been absent because of deployment



Shan Lu/SIUE Photo

Professor Goebel-Parker with her students at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

in war zones. She said that she believes that those situations have taken a big toll on families.

"Human beings are unbelievably resilient and all my work with people who have experienced trauma has really taught

me a lot about resiliency," she said.

"Children often are definitely learning from the adults around them how to handle situations or what to make of something."

She said that she sees an increasing interest among students to become art therapists.

"There is so much that students are interested in that it amazes me, the vastness of the possibilities," she said. "We have a lot of interest in our program. We tend to get about four to five inquiries for every spot we have in the program. We feel really lucky that we are esteemed that well. I also think it is the university and its wonderful support for students as well." She also said that she sees all of her students getting jobs after their graduate. "They can qualify for the professional counselor's license and that is, I think, one of the reasons our program is in demand."

Goebel-Parker is currently wrapping up research about a community arts training institute program that puts social service workers and artists together and then brings in people like art therapists. The participants then cross-train each other in issues surrounding social justice. "I have been sort of looking at what the impact of this training is that has gone on for 14 years here in St. Louis and what the impacts of having all these people trained is doing, what kind of effect that is having," she said.

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.