

Creative Heartwork provides art therapy to children

Mendham woman leads only children's art therapy non-profit in state

By ANNA WEISGERBER
Contributing Writer

Generations of caregivers have understood the importance of fairy tales to young minds struggling to understand their place in the world.

Children have always enjoyed stories with happy endings, no matter how frightening the interim plot twists may be.

Some children, as victims of shameful neglect and vicious abuse, or as witnesses to horrible crimes, need to hear more than others that happy endings can lay ahead.

Karen Carbonello of Mendham understands that by virtue of her long career as a sociologist.

The instinctive, natural need for artistic expression as a means of individual healing has always captured Carbonello's interest.

"I've interviewed many adult survivors of abuse and trauma," says Carbonello, "and I was always interested in what they did to get by, how they kept themselves together."

She adds that most of the survivors she's talked to did not seek professional help.

"What they did was keep journals, keep sketchbooks, and write poetry," she shares.

New Directions, New Venture

Carbonello recently served as director of the Deirdre O'Brien Child Advocacy Center in Morristown.

The O'Brien Center, which opened in 1996, is a child-friendly place offering housing, therapy, prevention, and advocacy for the community's

youngest victims of crime.

Carbonello was instrumental in launching the O'Brien center's successful Mending Arts program.

"The Mending Arts program served children of abuse and neglect," she says. It specialized in professionally led music, art, dance, and drama workshops.

Over the course of two years, 75 young people participated.

"Sessions were 10 weeks long, with classes meeting once a week for one and one-half hours," she said.

Response was so enthusiastic that the center began receiving calls from parents and psychologists who wanted to enroll children outside the usual referral process of social services and the courts.

So Carbonello decided to leave the O'Brien center and make Mending Arts a full-time program available to a wider audience of children.

The new venture includes not only the Mending Arts program, which the O'Brien Center signed over to Creative Heartwork's management, but branched off to include The Heartist Within for children who are homebound, or residing in hospices, hospitals, or other residential facilities; TenderArts for children experiencing serious or chronic illness or disabilities; and network of volunteers who assist in workshops and help in fundraisers and donation drives.

"We are announcing our grand opening in January 2003," says Carbonello, "and we already have a waiting list of 30 children, so we know there is a need."

"Down the road," Carbonello suggests, "what we'd really like is to have a barn that we can use for arts and performance."

For now, she says they have been blessed with many organi-

Work Of Heart

Here's an example of a workshop Creative Heartwork is putting together. It's called Every-thing in its Place. "This workshop is designed specifically for children who have lost a sibling or a parent," Carbonello explains, adding, "Many of these children have severe nightmares."

The workshop has an arts and a music component. Each child is given an unpainted wooden nightstand. They will learn the art of decoupage, and thereby decorate the interior of the piece with pictures and photos of remaining family members, and poetry tributes of those they have lost.

The kids will then learn faux finishing techniques, and apply these skills to decorate the outside of the nightstand, and choose their own knobs and hardware. The top of the stand will be inlaid with a tile mosaic that the child designs and crafts. The music component of this workshop includes therapeutic drumming. "The kids will actually record their own relaxation CD which they can take home with them," explains Carbonello.

Creative Heartwork is the only non-profit in the state dedicated exclusively to art therapy for children, but does not have a building of its own just yet.

"We'll rent places where the kids are," says Carbonello. "We figure out where our students are coming from in terms of ages, interests, and location, and then try to find a space near them so that they don't have to travel so long in the van." The first such satellite programs are slated for Dover, Morristown, and Chester.

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(Photo by Anna Weisgerber)

Creative Hearts

Offer children the opportunity to create a "throne of their own" and be ready for delightful results. So says Karen Carbonello, founder of Creative Heartwork (CH) in Mendham, who displays a photo of a charming seat crafted by a recent Mending Arts student. CH is a non-profit program, promoting awareness of the healing benefits of the arts by offering workshops in dance, drama, art, music, and cooking to children who have been traumatized by abuse, illness, loss, and disability. The group held its first fund-raising event Oct. 4 at the Brookside Community Club in Mendham Township.

es," she adds. She likes to avoid classroom-style spaces, "because so many of these kids are failing in that environment."

Artists Welcome Children

Creative Heartwork workshops are designed for children age 6 - 16. Students are referred through school counselors, private therapists, social services agencies, hospitals, hospices, and the victim's advocate in the prosecutor's office.

The artists who are contracted to lead workshops in music, art, dance, and drama are referred through the Arts Council of the Morris Area and work in conjunction with a board-certified, master's-level creative arts therapist.

Carolyn Ward of the Long Val-

expanding the opportunities for children to express themselves.

The arts council serves as the referral agency for Creative Heartwork's teaching artists.

"I thoroughly believe in the power of art to heal young people. I've seen it happen. Art gives people an opportunity to express themselves in ways that words cannot," says Ward.

The arts council keeps a roster of artists who are qualified to go into schools as guest teachers, and the ones who are recommended for Creative Heartwork, Ward said, are especially in tune to the process of making works of art, as a learning journey.

Another Heartwork workshop, entitled Myth vs. Reality, is based on the myth of Pando-

children will design costumes and masks, then write and stage a play based on the myth. They may well conclude, as did Greek mythologist Thomas Bulfinch writes that, "while we have (hope), no amount of other ills can make us completely wretched."

This story book wisdom told for hundreds of generations is ever new; it never tires.

Carbonello, 45, lives in Thackeray Road in Mendham with her husband Gary, and their two children Lyndsey and Justin. She has a master's degree in sociology, specializing in the sociology of medicine and family. She often lectures and teaches at Montclair State College.

Those seeking more information about Creative Heartwork

Chester - Crime

IN THE CHESTERS THE MENDHAMS