



LARRY MARCHIONDA

*Creative arts therapist Shelley Knoodle asks veteran Leon Allen to talk about what his painting represents during art therapy group at the John D. Dingell VA Medical Center in Detroit. At left is veteran Richard Marsh.*

# Using Art as Therapy

**Applying paint to canvas helps veterans learn about themselves as they explore their feelings and share with others what their art represents.**

**F**or art therapist Shelley Knoodle, what the individual puts on the canvas is not nearly as important as what the individual learns about himself.

As veterans seek health care at VA facilities for their physical and mental ailments, treatment teams often incorporate art therapy into the veterans' treatment plans. VA offers art therapy at 15 medical centers across the nation, according to Larry

Long, VA's director of Recreation Therapy Service. Art therapy falls under the umbrella of Recreation Therapy Service, which also includes music, drama and dance.

Knoodle facilitates art therapy for both inpatients and outpatients at the John D. Dingell VA Medical Center in Detroit. Veterans in her groups deal with depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and post-traumatic stress disorder.

"I'm not trying to teach art or create artists," she said, "I'm trying to deal with behaviors and responses through art making."

The veterans in her groups range in age from 22 to 99 and their military service spans from World War II to Operation Iraqi Freedom. She facilitates eight groups each week, with group sizes ranging from 10 to 20 veterans. Groups have a mix of both male and female veterans, with males

comprising the majority of the group makeup.

At the beginning of group, Knoodle offers some introductory remarks and gives the participants a directive on the concept she wants them to express through their art. In one recent group, for example, veterans were asked to focus on the concept of inner strength. They worked on their drawings for about half an hour and then took turns holding up their artwork and explaining what it represented to the rest of the class.

“The art-making ‘experiential’ is more about processing than creating a masterpiece,” Knoodle said. “It’s engaging with the media that allows one to deal with an issue, or just the sake of making art.”

Her art therapy participants gain a great deal of insight about themselves through the experientials, said Knoodle. When veterans begin art therapy, she sees their defenses “really come up” and they’re often quite angry about their life circumstances.

“Once they face their fear by engaging in the art process, they discover courage as a strength to use outside the hospital,” she said. “The process gives them a sense of empowerment.”

John Wright agrees that he has gained insights about himself through his participation in art therapy. A resident of the Baltimore VA Rehabilitation & Extended Care Center (BRECC), a division of the VA Maryland Health Care System, the 52-year-old Air Force and Army Reserve veteran uses a wheelchair due to the debilitating effects of multiple sclerosis. He no longer has the use of his legs and has limited mobility in his arms and hands.

With the early morning sunlight streaming into the large picture window in the art therapy room, Wright leaned forward in his wheelchair and struggled to keep his right hand steady as he applied lavender acrylic paint to the background of his painting featuring four butterflies in flight.



RICHARD THOMPSON

*Martha Haeseler talks to veteran Carlos Robles about the sculpture he created during an art therapy group in Giant Steps, the program she coordinates at the VA Connecticut Healthcare System in West Haven.*

Occasionally he would look over to compare his work with a photograph of a brightly colored butterfly affixed to an easel.

While Wright painted, art therapist Sandra Widomski pulled out tins of watercolor paint and helped three of his fellow veterans get started painting pre-drawn sketches of owls. The veterans sat at a large round table chatting quietly amongst themselves and listening to the music

piped into the room.

Wright said his physical limitations often frustrate him, but by refusing to let them define him through his participation in art therapy, he has learned that “life is what you make it.”

The products of art therapy can offer valuable information for care providers, according to Dr. Mark Heuser, director of the Geriatrics & Long Term Care Clinical Center for

the VA Maryland Health Care System. For the geriatrics physician, art therapy may provide information useful in developing an individualized treatment plan for the veteran.

BRECC residents face a variety of physical and cognitive health care issues: functional limitations due to stroke or Parkinson's disease, dementia and end-of-life care. Heuser explained that the treatment team might learn something significant about the veteran's mental state by examining the art he produces. Bleak or frenetic drawings could indicate depression, loneliness, stress, anxiety or pain.

"The veteran's art might be a key piece of information in planning his course of treatment," Heuser said.

Art therapy can be used as both a diagnostic tool and a treatment modality for residents, according to Heuser. For example, when staff members notice that a newly admitted veteran is withdrawn and avoiding interaction with others, "prescribing" art therapy might help him integrate into the community by facilitating connections with others.

Connecting veterans with their communities is one of the outcomes Martha Haeseler sees in her art therapy program, known as "Giant Steps." The outpatient program at the VA Connecticut Healthcare System in West Haven is designed for veterans in treatment for psychiatric disorders such as PTSD, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. Other veterans in the program have experienced childhood abuse or sexual trauma while serving in the military.

The majority of the 45 veterans in Giant Steps cannot work due to the severity of their symptoms, but they periodically offer their artwork for sale at VA Connecticut and put

the proceeds toward a variety of causes.

Giant Steps participant Carlos Robles particularly likes this aspect of the program. The 51-year-old Navy veteran said he used to feel badly about not being able to work and worried that he was "a liability" and "not a contributing member of society."

Four years of participating in Giant Steps has changed all of that.

"I have learned that I'm not a useless person," Robles said. "Through this program we have been able to

drawn and avoided contact with others. Now she enjoys interacting with her fellow veteran artists in Giant Steps and sharing ideas about art with them as she creates jewelry or quilts in group.

"It calms me and keeps me at peace with myself and life and society," she said. "It gets me to intermingle with people again."

An Army veteran from an earlier war has also experienced improved self-esteem through his participation in Giant Steps over the past four years. Larry Paquette, a 58-year-old Vietnam veteran, attends group twice a week to draw portraits.

"It makes me feel better about myself," he said.

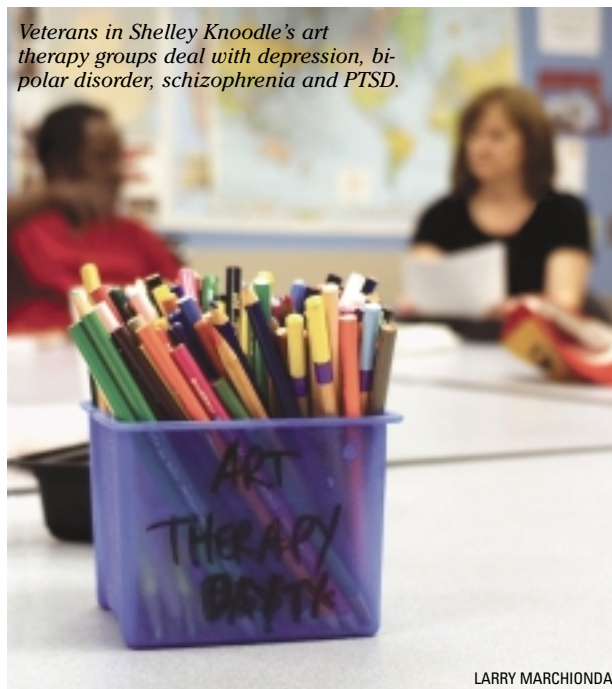
For Haeseler, the goal of art therapy depends on the needs and the wishes of each individual veteran.

"For one it might be to find solace from physical pain," she said, "or to be less critical of his or her work. For another, to gain control over traumatic material by expressing it in art, or to find relief from symptoms by focusing on something positive. It really depends on where the veteran wants to go with the art and helping him or her be comfortable with doing so."

Melanie Zarabi works hard to create a culture and a climate in which the veterans participating in her weekly art therapy group feel comfortable expressing themselves through their art. She encourages the 20 participants in her group to "just play and experiment with the art materials" and not worry about what the image looks like.

"We're not after 'let's make a beautiful image here,'" she said.

Zarabi is coordinator of the creative arts therapy program at the VA New York Harbor Healthcare System in Brooklyn. The program is designed for both inpatients and outpatients in



*Veterans in Shelley Knoodle's art therapy groups deal with depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and PTSD.*

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sell our artwork to make money to contribute to disasters like Hurricane Katrina and the tsunami. When we do stuff like that, we find that we do contribute."

Participating in Giant Steps has also boosted Pam Taylor's self-esteem and confidence. The 40-year-old Army veteran of Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm learned about the program through other veterans and has been attending group since January.

Since leaving active duty in 1995, Taylor said she had been with-



From left, veterans Andrea Lawrence, Edward Barone and Larry Drye go over their artwork with Creative Arts Therapist Melanie Zarabi at the VA New York Harbor Healthcare System's Brooklyn campus.

the treatment of psychiatric disorders.

Andrea Lawrence suffers from bipolar disorder and depression. The 45-year-old Army veteran says she has achieved a sense of self-worth and hope through her participation in the Brooklyn art therapy program for the past two years.

"It has helped me get in touch with my inner self," Lawrence said. "I started believing in my dreams again."

The former Army cook said her goal is to someday work as a pastry chef and build a house. She's been working on a drawing of a house surrounded by trees with a garden.

Luis Santos has participated in the Brooklyn art therapy program for the past five years. The 50-year-old Army veteran jokes that he's not much of an artist, but says art therapy has helped him with his true passion of writing poetry and rap songs.

At the end of group, there is a session called "Open Mike" during which veterans can stand up and say anything they want. Santos said they come out of art therapy "so fired up because there is so much good humor and camaraderie" that everyone wants to be the first to stand up and share with the group. Santos likes to read

his poetry and perform his rap songs.

Larry Drye had been living on the streets of Brooklyn for 18 years before joining the VA art therapy program in 1999. The 59-year-old Army veteran served as a combat medic during the Vietnam War. He read an article about VA, and decided to stop in at the Brooklyn campus. VA doctors diagnosed him as suffering from PTSD.

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"I just thought I was a bad person," he said.

Drye said he has difficulty getting in touch with his emotions. When he first started attending art therapy, he didn't talk to anyone.

Slowly, he began to open up and started talking to his fellow veterans. Working on paintings and collages helped him work through his PTSD symptoms.

"I could express the locked-in things that I'm afraid to talk about or can't talk about," Drye said.

Art therapy has also provided relief from PTSD symptoms for Edward

Barone. The 58-year-old Army veteran of Vietnam said his pictures were bleak when he first started art therapy two years ago because he was really angry.

He was also attending a combat veterans group, which forced his thoughts about the Vietnam War to the forefront. Barone said these thoughts came out in his art. He painted an Asian face and an American face peering out from the jungle, with red paint splattered on the canvas. He named his work "Blood on the Leaves."

"I have these feelings of guilt," Barone said. "Art therapy helped me confront it."

Today he paints colorful florals on wood and constructs Andy Warhol collages featuring Warhol's photo, a Campbell's soup label, and a splash of red. Barone sells his art on the sidewalk at Union Square in Manhattan two days a week. He has also joined the Brooklyn Waterfront Artists' Coalition.

"I'm not a Picasso, but I think my stuff is good," he said.

While the ultimate goal of therapy may not be to transform veterans into the next Picasso or Van Gogh, veterans in the program are

creating some exceptional fine art.

Knoodle and Haeseler plan local art shows each spring; the first-place winners advance to the regional competition. Regional winners then advance to the national-level competition—the National Veterans Creative Arts Festival—held each year in October. Veterans invited to participate are selected winners of year-long, national fine arts talent competitions in which thousands of veterans enter from VA medical facilities across the nation. **VA**

By Renee McElveen