

The Art of Creating Community

Some people are like magnets. They draw creative ideas, people, and the resources to establish institutions that create community locally and throughout the world. Such is the power of Mary Kathleen McGraw, more fondly known as Mickie. In 1967 she co-founded The Art Therapy Studio (ATS) at Highland View Rehabilitation Hospital in Cleveland, Ohio (now MetroHealth Rehabilitation Institute of Ohio), along with Dr. George Streeter. First known as the Art Studio, the agency will be celebrating its 40th anniversary in 2007.



The history of the ATS is intertwined with Mickie's life and her response to a life-changing event. Her interest in art began before she contracted polio at the age of 11. It "provided me with personal experience of the real power of art to heal. It was a natural activity and expressive outlet for me when I found myself restricted to a wheelchair," she points out. Fortunately, volunteer artists visited her home weekly over the period of a few years offering lessons and various media. As a result, Mickie became skillful, gained confidence, and began to identify herself as an artist. "The artwork I created literally re-created me," she says. "It showed me that I could still be a productive individual even though I now had to find new and alternative ways to solve problems."

Majoring in graphic design at the Cleveland Institute of Art, Mickie continued with her passion. She especially liked drawing, watercolor and printmaking during school and found herself working one summer in the graphic design department of Highland View Hospital before obtaining her BFA. In a chance meeting with Dr. Streeter, Chief of Psychiatry at Highland View, he voiced his dream of opening an art studio for patients who were not benefiting from verbal therapy. After about a year of planning, Dr. Streeter convinced the Hospital to donate a room and the Art Studio opened its doors with Mickie as its artist/teacher and a non-profit board to raise money to support the program. Although many people sculpted Mickie's vision of herself as an art therapist, Streeter was key. "He was and is an artist himself and believes in the healing power of art," Mickie points out.

Not long after interacting with patients using art, a few early art therapy pioneers saw or heard about ATS and commented that Mickie was doing art therapy. She at first questioned these observations. Under Dr. Streeter's guidance, Mickey simply viewed herself as an artist teaching others the way of art. In addition, there were no training programs for art therapy at the time, so she did not fully understand an art therapist's role.

On the other hand, Mickie states that after "further study, hands-on learning and many debates about what the therapeutic use of art was and what it wasn't, I began to understand the many ways that art could be used to help people." For example, she assisted patients to create paintings while holding brushes in their mouths or to use their non-dominant hands after a



stroke. At this point, “I began to see that I was an art therapist.”

Professional ties like the American Art Therapy Association (AATA) additionally reinforced Mickie’s commitment to the art therapy realm. For example Judy Rubin attended her first Buckeye Art Therapy Association (BATA) presentation at Highland View. Rubin supported and encouraged Mickie’s work at a time when support was greatly needed. Many other mentors surfaced from Mickie’s long involvement with BATA and AATA. They included pioneers like Eleanor Ulman, Gladys Agell, Don Jones, Petie Sildeggs, Myra Levick, Kathy Kahn-Denis and Martha Stitt.

From her experience, mentors, and MA in Counseling at John Carroll University, Mickie developed an art-centered approach to art therapy. She posits that

the value of art centered therapy lies in its image producing nature that lasts beyond the moment of creation and provides a link to our innermost feelings, including those we cannot access ourselves. The result is a dynamic collaboration that allows the creator to use the media and techniques of painting or drawing or sculpting to recreate parts of the self and...discover or recover aspects that are new or have been lost.

The beliefs about the therapeutic value of art can be witnessed at ATS. This non-profit agency has grown from a one-room hospital based program at Highland View to an innovative therapeutic arts program. ATS offers individual and group art therapy services to over 3500 people a year in a wide variety of settings in northeastern Ohio. Its mission is to provide the arts to special needs populations who would not ordinarily have art instruction available or accessible to them. Their special emphasis is on children and adults who are physically disabled or are medically or emotionally ill. Art is additionally offered to individuals interested in a wellness approach to health with specialized programs for frail and well elderly. Lastly, the agency offers education programs on the therapeutic use of art for healthcare and other professionals in related fields who serve special needs clients.

In her work for ATS, Mickie’s major interest has been with patients and their families suffering neurological deficiencies such as brain and spinal cord injuries. MetroHealth specializes in neurological rehabilitation. As the former manager of their Activity Therapy Division, it is not surprising that Mickie contributed to a chapter called, “Medical Art Therapy with Adults,” in Medical Art Therapy edited by Cathy Malchiodi. The ATS has provided a model for many other hospitals and organizations interested in the collaboration between art and medicine. For example, ATS staff has consulted with programs and hospitals as far away as Russia, Australia and New Zealand.

Not only has Mickie influenced how art is used in hospitals worldwide, she also shaped the art therapy careers of many graduate students as a supervisor in Cleveland. To a new or to be art therapy student, she



offers three points of wisdom around the benefits and the challenges in the field. First of all, Mickie states, "it is important to keep open to new possibilities and to not stop learning." Secondly, joining and contributing to BATA and AATA are necessary to deepen one's stance as an art therapist. Thirdly, she also advises to continue with one's own art because it is essential in empowering yourself and your clients.

On the other hand, art therapists face a number of obstacles. Mickie says, for example, "the lack of funding is the most significant problem for art therapists." Art programs also historically are first to go in lean times or are not in existence at all. The final challenge is to become "a pioneer for other art therapists. We are still a new field and need to pave the way for others," she says. Yet because art therapists are creative, they have demonstrated many ways to start and to continue programs.

Mickie not only developed programs for ATS, her creative force influenced art therapy communities at Ursuline College and at Akron General Medical Center. For example Sr. Kathleen Burke notes that "in 1973 during our early stages of designing an undergraduate sequence of art therapy courses, she wisely advised me to seek education and training in the field" before instituting Ursuline's Master of Arts in Art Therapy Program. Similarly Chris McGowan, Director of Behavioral Medicine at Akron General Medical Center, also credits Mickie as "a key player in the Akron art therapy circle." He added that her support was "one of the main reasons he was able to convince Akron General to hire him as their Director of Partial Hospitalization."

The number of lives Mickie has touched and is touching is staggering even though she is now retired. If you have the good fortune of knowing her, her enthusiasm for art can be seen everywhere in her home, a place where the telephone never stops ringing. Not that she's there to answer it, for she attends ATS, "Discover the Artist Within You" classes on Fridays. She currently enjoys working in collage or acrylic paintings depicting figurative images and portraits. On other days she is at the ATS Fairhill location serving as Secretary of the Board of Trustees, or she is busy supervising art therapists. In any of these roles, she gives of herself, her experience and joy, born of the creative process. She a model for self-actualization, and would tell you art was the primary catalyst.