

Keene Sentinel

Dance, dance revolution

Proponents say creative arts can help teens look inward positively

By Anika Clark

Sentinel Staff

Published: Tuesday, October 27, 2009

They say music soothes the soul. But at MAPS Counseling Services in Keene, some clients have used melodies to discover a deeper mental harmony. During weekly after-school sessions, members of the Girls Creative Arts and Music Group have used songwriting to build self-esteem, they've formed peer connections over chords and they've belted out emotions that can be difficult to understand.

Describing the range of issues the therapy group can address, licensed clinical mental health counselor Stephanie L. Bernius Kimber said, "Music has helped them be able to express themselves ... (to) talk about their experiences through their music and through their voice — actually using their voice, some of them for the first time." Bernius Kimber, a senior staff therapist at MAPS, started the group with resident staff therapist Adele G. Michaelides Thomas about a year ago and a half ago for girls ages 9-12 and 13-18. Bernius Kimber said participants learn everything from basic guitar skills to songwriting.

Members help each others wade childhood's choppy waters by participating in role-playing scenarios — processing situations, such as getting a poor grade in school or dealing with bullying, by acting them out. Giving girls the tools to share, write and collaborate on their own "hit songs" helps them to believe in themselves and feel less isolated, Michaelides Thomas said.

And although children can have difficulty labeling their emotions, Bernius Kimber said vocal techniques can help them give voice to their feelings and hear how they carry different tones in song. "In society, we tend to lean towards anger more than exploring what lies underneath our anger," she explained, adding the group also uses a cognitive and behavioral approach. "If a girl is angry, but what's underneath her anger is hurt, we can talk about it, she can write about it and ... explore it musically."

A 2003 article published in *The Arts in Psychotherapy* by University of Ottawa doctoral candidate Heather B. MacIntosh says music can also have physical benefits. "Current research ... indicates that physical health and well being and immune function are improved as a result of musical interventions in the therapeutic process," she wrote. Controlled trials, according to MacIntosh, have shown music accompanying a decrease in anxiety, blood pressure, heart rate and psychosomatic reactions and an increase in pain thresholds.

MAPS Counseling Services also offers other arts-supported healing by Senior Staff Therapist Wendy Elliott, who is accredited in dance/movement therapy and registered as

a therapist who uses the expressive arts. Both Elliott and the MAPS Counseling creative arts group are examples of practices that have taken modern psychology well beyond traditional “talk” therapy.

The National Coalition of Creative Arts Therapies Associations count more than 15,000 members in its ranks, offering mental healing through music, drama, poetry, visual art and dance.

According to experts in these fields, this brand of therapy carries long historical roots. Susan T. Loman — a professor and director of the dance/movement therapy and counseling program at Antioch University New England — discussed the history of her field in an article published in the 2001-02 edition of the Dance Magazine College Guide. Dance/movement therapy didn’t officially become a profession until the 1960s, according to Loman. But she charts the field’s history in ancient healing, including the ritualistic dances of shamans.

In 1942, Marian Chace began using dance at Washington, D.C.’s St. Elizabeth’s Hospital to work with psychologically-scarred World War II veterans, and she became a full-time dance therapist in 1947, according to the American Dance Therapy Association. The Maryland-based American Music Therapy Association traces the notion of using music for therapeutic means back at least as far as Aristotle and Plato. The modern discipline arose after World War I and World War II, when musicians were dispatched to veterans hospitals to aid mentally and physically wounded soldiers.

Also in the 1940s, art therapy became a distinct profession, according to the American Art Therapy Association Inc. in Virginia. This followed psychiatrists’ interest in their patients’ artwork, and a realization by educators that children’s art reflects their emotional, developmental and intellectual progress. Nowadays, creative arts therapy is not only widely accepted, Michaelides Thomas said, but is a growing movement. “Basically, it’s using the creative arts to deal with certain issues,” said Robert G. Koch, Franklin Pierce’s director of outreach education, who uses creative arts therapy in his counseling on campus and also teaches a course on the subject. “You’re getting to an issue without just talking to somebody – you’re tapping into another area of their brain.”

Koch offers group drama therapy to his clients, through which they’re able to act out problems, address their feelings and “get some of that hurt out,” he said. If someone is being abused, for example, they might not know how to confront their abuser, but when they’re in safe space, they can. Koch said he’s also used visual art as a therapy tool and encourages some clients to illustrate issues they’re dealing with. “What you want to do is get those people talking,” he said. “The more art they do, the more they open up.”

Loman, of Antioch, also described how movement and dance can be used to overcome communication barriers. While working with a child with schizophrenia, Loman said she tuned into his movement patterns, moved with him and was able to enter his world. “We created kind of a dialogue between us. ... He began to trust me,” she said, adding that this then helped him talk to her about issues he was experiencing. This type of

approach can also be used in working with children with autism and Asperger's syndrome, Loman said. Another way she's used movement is to help parents read their babies' non-verbal cues, which Loman said are indicators of developmental phases, personalities and temperament. She also described how dance/movement therapy can be used to help children suffering from cancer.

By encouraging a child to express through movement what the cancer feels like or pretend to stamp out their illness in a healing dance, she said, "It gives the kid a sense of empowerment."

And in group sessions with elderly clients, Loman has used dance to work on physical fitness and agility but also to trigger memories through the music. As a sense of community is built, and feelings of isolation are beaten down, Loman said, participants offer their own ideas for dance steps. In the process, she said, the activity helps fill a basic, lifelong human need: "They feel that they were heard, and seen, and understood." Still, creative arts therapy hasn't caught on everywhere.

"The field of dance/movement therapy is still not known by all, and those of us in the field have spent many an hour at workshops, conferences and even social gatherings explaining what we do," Loman wrote in her Dance Magazine College Guide article.

Speaking anecdotally, Brian D. Quigley, director of the counseling center at Keene State College, said, "There's a lot of efficacy that's been demonstrated empirically for creative arts therapy." But he said, it's not offered to the estimated 560 colleges students the center sees annually because no one on his staff has the background or the necessary level of credentials to do so. Meanwhile, although music therapy is reimbursable, following certain requirements, under Medicare, its reimbursement through Medicaid varies from state to state, according to the American Music Therapy Association. Growing public demand for music therapy has been accompanied by a rising level of third-party reimbursement, which the association predicts will skyrocket in coming years. But the estimated number of music therapists who receive money from private insurance is only "at least 20 percent," according to the association. The MAPS Counseling creative arts group is able to bill insurance companies, Barnes said, because rather than specifically music therapy, it's a form of psychotherapy that uses arts as a way to support goal-oriented counseling.

In the meantime, he said, communicating with girls through artistic means is intuitive. "You look at teenagers these days and they're all about music and it always has been that way," he said. And, according to some professionals, communication that comes through creative arts can also be less filtered. Creative arts therapy "can be a really strong tool to help people express emotions and thoughts that can be difficult in our conscious selves," but can tend to come out unconsciously in art, Bernius Kimber said.

A

s for dance, Loman summed it up as follows:

“Movement doesn’t lie.” MAPS Counseling Services plans to launch another Girls Creative Arts and Music Group, if enough people express interest, next year. For more information, call 355-2244 or e-mail office@MAPSnh.org.

Anika Clark can be reached at 352-1234, extension 1432, or aclark@keenesentinel.com.