

Proponent Testimony to The Health Committee
April 11, 2018
HB 557

Good Morning, Chairman Huffman, Vice-Chair Gavarone, Ranking Member Antonio, and all members of the Health Committee. My name is Kristen Herrmann, and I am here to testify in support of House Bill 557 and talk to you about the power art therapy has had in my own recovery. I have both schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. I was first hospitalized at the age of 13, but I showed symptoms of schizophrenia as early as the age of 8. I am now 53, stable and happily married. It has been over 3 years since I have been hospitalized. I have participated in art therapy in some form or another for the last 40 years of my life. Over the course of my life, I have been hospitalized well over 100 times in private, public, and criminal justice forensic hospitals. I have stayed as little as 24 hours to as long as 2 years. Although hospitals and treatments have changed over time, the one constant in my life has been art therapy. I have worked with many art therapists during my life, but it is the first art therapist I ever met, Don Jones ATR, who I credit with helping me to achieve the state of recovery that I am in now. True art therapy is not “keep busy” arts and crafts. Art therapists have a unique skill set and body of knowledge that allow them to help not only the mentally ill, but others with health and expression issues too. Art therapists go through a master’s level college program and complete over 700 hours of clinical internship experience. Art therapy is unique in its ability to allow me to express my feelings, and the thoughts that go on inside my head. At times, I just can’t put words to them, but I can draw or sculpt a representation of those feelings and thoughts. And together with my art therapist, we look at the artwork to see what it means and what the thoughts and feelings are behind what I have created. The self-knowledge and insight I get out of a session with an art therapist is almost magical. They guide me to see in my artwork what I can’t express verbally. Here are some examples of my therapeutic artwork:

When I can’t think straight, and my thoughts are all jumbled up in my head, or when I hear the occasional auditory hallucination of voices, I pull out my crayons or paint, and just make marks on a sheet of paper (Fig. 1). Sometimes I draw images and sometimes I just draw squiggles and lines. I just let my emotions move my hand. Then with my art therapist, I look at what I have drawn and what it means. We look at shapes, colors, how hard I pressed when I was drawing a certain thing. Sometimes he will point to an image or squiggle and say, Kristen; you are this squiggle talk to me. How do you feel? Why are you here? What do you want to say? And by doing this, I am able to identify and own my feelings and emotions. I can get them out of my head and on to the paper so my mind is free for other things. It is so freeing to finally have your cluttered mind emptied.



Fig.1



Fig. 2

units. I knew I was an alien not a human and that was that. Talking about it wasn't convincing me of anything. Finally it was an art therapist who was able to help me. He set me up with an easel and mirror and told me to draw what I saw in the mirror, don't think, just draw exactly what your eyes see he told me. It took me about 6 weeks to draw and paint the face you see in this picture. When I was done, he sat down with me and my painting and we looked at pictures of other faces in an art book that I knew and acknowledged were human. With his help, I looked to find what was similar and what was different between my portrait and the portraits of the humans. It was only by doing this that I was finally able to accept that I was not an alien, but I was a human who felt alienated. It was only because of this art therapy exercise that I was able to make this breakthrough. Talking had gotten me nowhere but art therapy brought me back from living in my delusion.



Fig. 5

At times I have been so withdrawn as to be almost catatonic. This picture is really not a picture, but a conversation (Fig. 5). My art therapist came up with a good way to draw me out of my shell. I would make a mark on the paper, and then he would make a mark on the paper, and then back to me to make a mark, and then back to him and so on. In the early days, our conversations were pretty one sided. I made my marks in the open space. They didn't touch his or build off his. But he would make his marks connect to mine, or elaborate on mine. Over time our conversations got to the point where I would let my marks interact and build on his marks. This is one of those conversations.

This picture is kind of disturbing (Fig. 6). But there was a time when I felt so bad that I just wanted to blow my brains out. This picture was my way of showing my art therapist why I wanted to blow my brains out. Each image in the painting represents a reason for killing myself. We talked about and explored each of them, and as you can see, I did not kill myself.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

This is a representation of when I felt I had different people living inside me and inserting thoughts into my brain (Fig. 7). All looking out through my green eyes.



Fig. 8

This is a self-portrait I did when I felt lonely and abandon (Fig. 8). It is me curled up sitting on a bench at a hospital.



Fig. 9

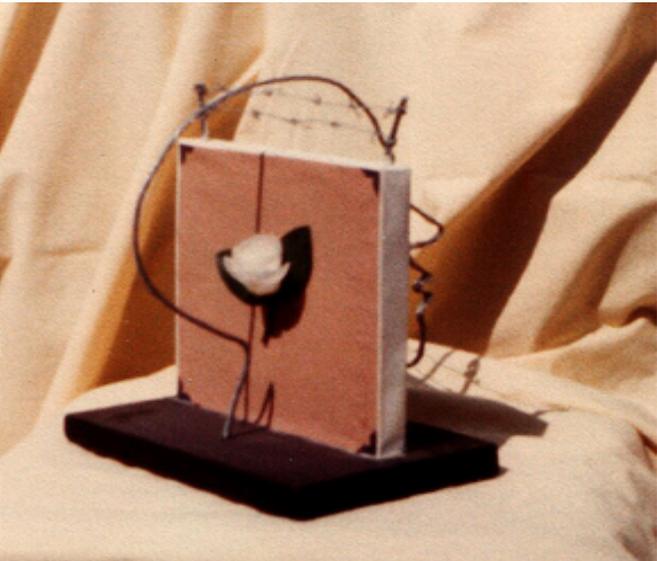


Fig. 10

This is a sculpture of the barriers and wall inside my head that was blocking and preventing me from letting people into my life to see the true me represented here by a blooming flower (Fig. 9, Fig. 10).

I can tell you art therapy has been a godsend to me over the years. I don't think I could have garnered the self-awareness I now have without the help of my art therapy and the many art therapists I have worked with. They are a unique part of the health care team. I hope you pass this bill because art therapists should be independently licensed and treated as the true unique healthcare providers that they are. Up until recently, I have been seeing Don Jones, the first art therapist I ever met back when I was 13, on and off for art therapy. He recently passed away and I need to find a new art therapist to work with. Because right now art therapists aren't licensed, anyone with a box of crayons can say "I am an art therapist". But, if art therapists were licensed, I would know whether I am getting a trained healthcare professional, or a just a guy off the street with a box of crayons. By licensing art therapists, you would be protecting consumers like myself who need the services a trained art therapist provides.

I will leave you with one saying from my art therapist Don Jones ATR and co-founder of the American Art Therapy Association: **ART IS LIFE IS ART.**

Thank you again for allowing me to testify in support of House Bill 557 and I would be happy to answer any questions the committee may have.

Thank You,
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