

# Art from the Broken Heart

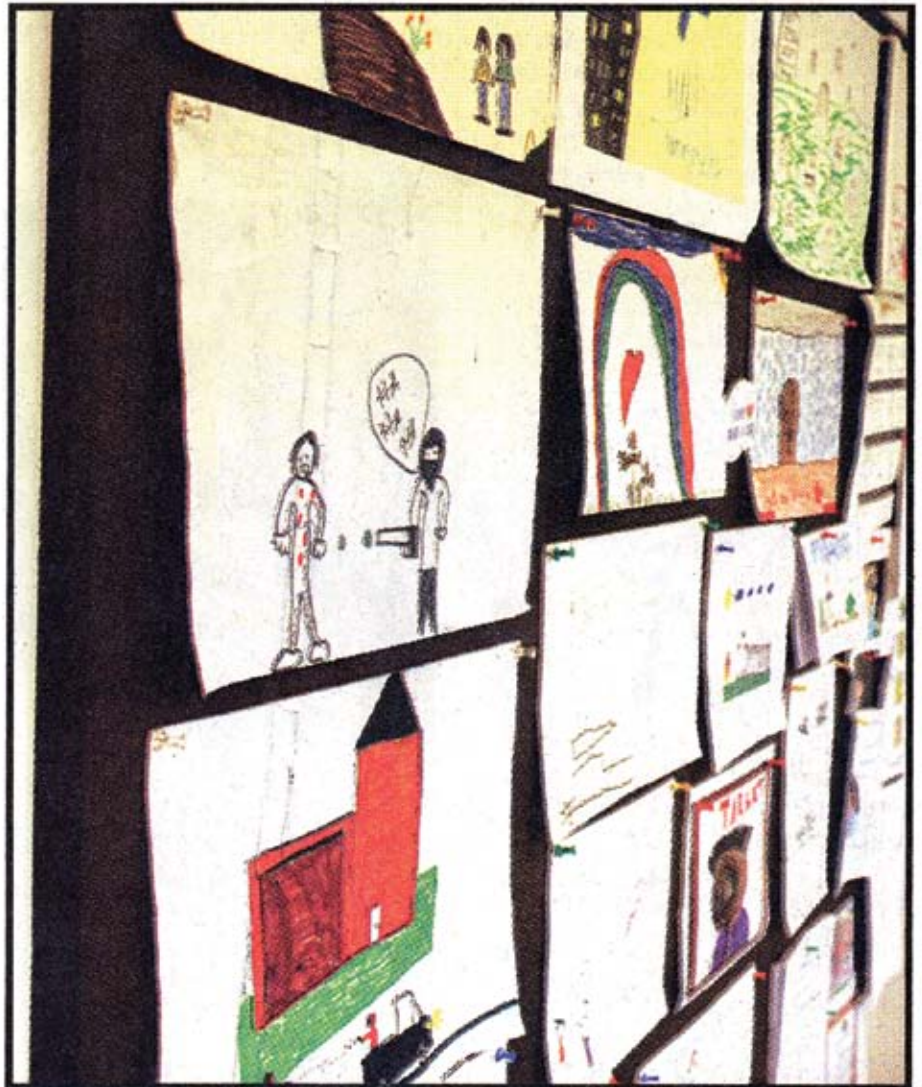
*The Share and Care program helps young children cope with gang violence.*

**By Ryan Smith**

A drawing scrawled in black marker shows a melancholy stick figure girl lying stiffly in bed with a thought bubble reading "I only feel safe in my bed" appearing over her head. A colorful adjacent piece finds a small girl and a parent posing family portrait-style in front of a house, but the idyllic scene is marred by three corpses lying dead in the lawn.

These scenes may sound disturbing coming from the hands and minds of elementary school students, but the drawings are actually part of an art therapy program administered by the Psychological Trauma Center called "Share and Care" designed in part to help children traumatized by gang violence.

"Many young children have a hard time expressing themselves verbally, but they can put their feelings and emotions on paper. We're trying to introduce new kinds of thinking and coping to let children deal with the violence, fear and sadness that are all too prevalent in their homes and neighborhoods," said Susanne Silverstein, president and co-founder of the Psychological Trauma Center—a non-profit mental health organization affiliated with Cedars-Sinai Medical Center.



**ART FOR THE SOUL**—Elementary school students' artwork is displayed at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, where they take part in a unique art therapy program meant to help children heal from tragedies.  
*Photo by Chris Pycior*

Share and Care serves 11 different Los Angeles Unified schools—including some Westside elementary schools in West Hollywood, Venice and Mar Vista. Counselor-therapists conduct more than 50 group meetings each week and see a total of about 500 students.

The focus of Share and Care is group-focused counseling that includes the use of art therapy and discussions led by a therapist to get students to communicate and to learn coping skills. In art therapy, patients express their feelings not just through discussion, but also through drawing, painting and sculpting.

"We say, 'Draw someone you can talk to' or 'Draw something that scares you,' and they often can, even when they wouldn't normally talk about it," Silverstein said.

Silverstein said she's always looking to expand the program because data she's collected shows 70 to 80 percent of kids enrolled in the program "improve" from it.

In Los Angeles, where gang membership has soared to more than 70,000 and there are signs of growing violence among blacks and Latinos in some struggling neighborhoods, promises have been made by local and state politicians to reverse the trend of gang violence with more police officers, more school and community counselors and more cooperation among agencies.

Silverstein says Share and Care works to stop the cycle by targeting young elementary children.

"I believe we need to get the younger kids because that's the age where we can reach them and give them options," Silverstein said. "We also hope to help break the cycle of violence as students learn healthy forms of expression and avoid striking back with more acts of violence."

Others say Share and Care works because it is preventative.

"We target kids who aren't necessarily identified as needing special services, yet face all sorts



of stress in their lives," said art therapist Tabitha Frank, a counselor for Share and Care. "Typically, the kids referred to us are in bad situations or have experienced trauma—the loss of parents, exposure to violence and other negative events and they don't have a safe place to talk about these things."

Silverstein noted that for kids in school that have been impacted by gangs and violence, it's hard to concentrate on schoolwork.

"Some of them have seen so much violence and killing they they've become almost frozen or deadened to it," Silverstein said. "How do you try and focus on math and science when you're worried about your mother

being arrested or 'Am I going to be shot?'

Interest in art therapy for trauma has skyrocketed in recent years because of world events such as the Sept. 11 attacks, the Asian tsunami, Hurricane Katrina and the Iraq war.

The Psychological Trauma Center was established in 1981 to help children deal with traumatic events such as natural disasters, sexual abuse and other traumatic events. But more and more children impacted by gangs became involved with the program over the years.

"As one counselor told us," Silverstein said, "some of these families live through a personal 9/11 everyday."