

Children Deal With Fear Through Art Therapy

■ Program Offered Through Cedars Sinai Medical Center Explores the Relationship Between Kids and Gangs

BY KRISTEN ORSBORN

For nearly 25 years, Suzanne Silverstein has helped more than 100,000 students, teachers, and parents face personal demons, confront gang violence and survive personal trauma. From her office, perched inside one of the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center's towers, Silverstein helps students living in some of the city's poorest, most crime-ridden areas.

Silverstein has headed the Psychological Trauma Center at Cedars since 1981, when she, along with three other mental health care professionals concerned with the lack of available programs for children impacted by violence or natural disasters, joined together to form the center.

The center's mission is to help children, teachers, families and other victims cope with traumatic events by traveling to area schools and giving free counseling. Since 1981, volunteer psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers and art therapists have provided more than 75,000 hours of service to direct and indirect victims of trauma at Los Angeles area schools.

Share and Care is a unique program offered by the center since 1995. The program, which serves 11 Los Angeles Unified schools, matches students who may be experiencing trauma together with art therapists and counselors. The program is focused on children dealing with a fear of gang-related violence and operates in schools in areas with the highest percentage of



photo by Kristen Orsborn

Psychologist and art therapist Suzanne Silverstein, director of the Share and Care program at Cedars Sinai Medical Center, sends counselors and therapists to schools in low income parts of the city that are sometimes plagued by gang violence.

gang-related crime.

"Psychological trauma of any kind affects a child's ability to concentrate and learn," Silverstein said. "By helping children begin to cope with the violence, fear and sadness that are all too prevalent in their homes and neighborhoods, we hope to improve their quality of life and help them achieve their highest

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*-Psychologist
Suzanne Silverman*

learning potential. 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."

The Share and Care program operates in 12-week cycles, sending counselors and art therapists to visit schools once a week, 12 times throughout the semester.

"We do a full assessment of each student," Silverstein said. "We learn about their family and community life, and try to understand if there are issues with violence. We do an overall picture so we understand the student."

Students and counselors have group discussions and draw pictures to describe their fears, hopes, dreams and realities. If children

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photo courtesy of Cedars Sinai Medical Center

A drawing by one of the participants in the program shows the level of fear some kids have to live with.

need more help than the 12-week cycle can offer, they can participate in the program again.

Silverstein stresses that the program isn't just an excuse to draw - there are actual academic benefits.

"We are specifically looking for kids who can't perform in class because of some kind of trauma or stressor," Silverstein said. "Kids who are scared to go outside for fear of getting killed. But we get a lot of good feedback. The kids are happier, they're more socialized and they're ready to learn."

In fact, Silverstein said that 70 to 80 percent of students who participate in the program see an increase in their academic success.

It's obvious from visiting Silverstein's office that she has a personal stake in the program. The kids' artwork occupies nearly every inch

of her office's wall space, and Silverstein talks animatedly about each drawing as if it were a Picasso or a Monet.

The artwork is often chilling.

"I'm sad over the loss of my uncle, who was killed in a drive by shooting."

- Mandy, a 4th grade participant in the Care and Share Program

Students draw pictures of guns, gang members, dead people, blood, and violent fights.

One child drew a picture of a black car flying over the sea, approaching a sunny, sandy beach.

"When I get scared by the gangs near my house, this is where I go with my thoughts," said Joey, the third grader who drew the picture.

A first grader, LaToya, drew a colorful basket adorned with hearts and full of gifts.

"This is a Thanksgiving basket of peace, full of kittens, made for my mother who has a problem with drugs," LaToya said.

Mandy, the fourth grader who drew the picture, describes it as her vision of a peaceful place.

"I'm sad over the loss of my uncle, who was killed in a drive by shooting," Mandy explained.

Silverstein hopes that Share and Care will help students learn to cope with trauma and become better stu-

dents. But ultimately, she hopes the program can help break an otherwise deadly cycle of violence on the hard streets.

"If we can make a difference and prevent someone from getting killed or going to jail, to me, that's an enormous reward," Silverstein said. "We can do something to make people's lives better."

One of the most gripping pictures in Silverstein's office is of a small child perched against a sky full of butterflies and hearts.