Art therapists help others find a voice

Fifteen years ago, Gretchen Miller graduated with a master’s degree in art therapy from Ursuline College. It was the only graduate program in art therapy that was offered in Ohio. Today she works as a registered board certified art therapist and certified trauma consultant at the Domestic Violence and Child Advocacy Center in Cleveland.

“I work with kids, adolescents and women who have been impacted by domestic violence. I also work with youth from the community that have suffered other trauma and loss,” Miller said.

Miller enjoyed art and being creative since childhood. In high school, she became interested in psychology and psychopathology and wanted to help people. She stumbled across art therapy because it combined all those aspects into one career. Now she is able to use her interest and passion in the arts and her fascination with psychology to help people in need.

While studying art therapy as an undergraduate at Bowling Green State University, a program that has since been discontinued, Miller decided to pursue the graduate program, which is the entry level educational level that is needed to practice art therapy. In addition to 1,000 hours of client contact session work, 100 hours of supervised work is required to meet eligibility requirements to become a registered art therapist.

“Once you become registered, you can sit for the certification exam that is offered by the Art Therapy Credentials Board,” Miller said. “I got the trauma certification later. I wanted to become more skilled in trauma approaches to address the populations that I was working with. A lot of the kids I have contact with have had trauma in their background.”

What it takes to succeed

Miller sees clients individually and in group sessions that are focused on certain themes or topics. They are things the client needs to address or work on. Facilitating and planning those therapy sessions is a huge part of the job, she said. It requires selecting materials and supplies, as well as the art interventions that will be used. There is a lot of note taking and documenting that must be done during and after each session.

An art therapist needs to be empathetic and flexible and must be able to develop a rapport with others. Relationship building is very important to the job, as well as being a good listener. You must also pay close attention to your own self-care, Miller advised.

“Because you face so many issues and try to meet so many different needs, you need to avoid burn out. Professional trust and focusing on your own self is important,” she said.

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Working as an art therapist is rewarding and meaningful work, Miller stated. She enjoys being able to provide people with the opportunity to share and express their feelings through their art and the creative process. That’s especially the case with those who have experienced trauma or difficult times in their life.

“Often, that can’t always be expressed through words or verbal language and communication. So being able to offer comfort through art and give people a voice is very empowering. It is rewarding to be part of that healing process,” Miller said.

For those who are interested in the career, Miller suggested taking an undergraduate course that’s focused on studio art and psychology to prepare you for the graduate program. It is important to have a passion for art and the field and be willing to commit wholeheartedly to your career.

While there are not a lot of job openings, people may be able to find employment in hospitals, residential treatment centers, outpatient and inpatient mental health facilities, schools, assisted living facilities, hospices, shelters, and in private practice.

**For more information**

For information about the master’s of arts in art therapy and counseling program that is offered at Ursuline College, visit ursuline.edu/Academics/Graduate_Professional/Masters_Programs/Art. The program prepares graduates to be eligible for both credentialing as an art therapist and licensure as a professional clinical counselor.

Visit www.atcb.org to learn more about credentialing by the Art Therapy Credentials Board.