Art + Soul = ArtSoul Therapy

By Cathy Nelson

In addition to being graduates of Wayne State’s Art Therapy Program and founders of ArtSoul Therapy in Royal Oak, Lisa Crystal, M.Ed. ’94, Tessa Bird, M.Ed. ’01, and Erin Shahly, M.Ed ’10, have something else in common: they never planned on careers as art therapists.

Both Bird and Crystal say they were drawn to art and psychology classes while pursuing degrees in other fields; Crystal earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in design from Michigan State University in 1989, Bird a bachelor of fine arts degree in photography in 1998 at the College for Creative Studies, where she minored in Art Therapy. “At CCS, I felt art-making was so therapeutic for my own life that this had to be my career,” Bird says.

Shahly, who minored in art while studying English and education at Saginaw Valley State University, became drawn to art therapy after graduation, while working with at-risk students and families as a reading specialist. “So many people had a lot of thoughts and feelings, but had difficulty communicating them,” Shahly says. “Growing up, I had always used art as a way to express myself and thought it would be a meaningful way to help others.”

Though they each studied and received their master’s degrees from Wayne State at different times, the three women worked together occasionally post-graduation, and eventually decided to start their own art therapy practice. In April 2014, they opened ArtSoul.

“I had gathered an array of experience with 25 years in the field when Erin, Tessa and I hooked up,” says Crystal, who recalls being laid off from full-time positions due to art therapy funding cuts. “They are much more business-minded than I am. We all have our strengths and it’s worked out really well.”

ArtSoul’s mission is “to provide therapeutic opportunities that empower individuals to heal, grow and discover.” Crystal says art therapy works because it offers patients an alternative way to communicate their feelings.
“Oftentimes, it is so hard for patients to express what they’re going through in words. But, you can use colors and materials and show somebody through that,” says Crystal. “I find it to be so powerful and healing for those who can’t use words.”

Bird, who works mainly with traumatic brain injury and Alzheimer’s disease patients, says that when patients are involved in making a piece of art, they usually don’t realize all the other skills they’re developing. “While creating art, they’re using decision making, problem-solving, fine-motor control, and hand-eye coordination.”

Bird says the process of making art also allows patients to relax, and open up to their therapists. “Creating art creates a conversation between the therapist and client that’s not intimidating,” she says. “Whatever they’re coming in for, be it physical pain or cognitive issues, the main thing is this gives them another way to express themselves and what’s happening in their lives.”

Not surprisingly, all three say they form close bonds with their patients and that seeing a patient progress is one of the most satisfying parts of their jobs.

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“Every person is on their own journey of self-discovery and insight,” says Shahly, who works with special education and oncology patients. “I just feel so blessed to be a part of the process.”

Dr. Holly Feen, associate professor and coordinator of Wayne’s Art Therapy Program, says she isn’t surprised to see the three former students succeed and thrive in the field.

“Erin, Lisa and Tessa shared similar qualities that are important to art therapy: They were open to possibilities, positive in nature and attitude, and mindful about how they approached all their work so that each task was completed artfully and with care,” Feen says. “They were devoted to their chosen profession and willing to work hard, to persevere despite art therapy opportunities not seeming to be immediately available through the want ads.”

Looking back, Bird, Crystal and Shahly all agree that Wayne’s program helped them prepare for their careers in many aspects. Feen says that’s exactly what the program is intended to do. “We typically include many self-exploratory art experiences in classes so that students can develop their strengths, self-awareness and professional identity. We also encourage students to reach out to community organizations while they are still students, offering their skills and doing in-service presentations about art therapy, and to retain an understanding about individual and societal needs,” Feen says.

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