

Journal Newspapers

Emotional Rescue

By Rachel Bayer, Nov. 1, 2005

The storm has passed but danger remains for those left behind from Hurricane Katrina. Physical needs have been met -- food, shelter, clothing -- but the time has come to face the intangible threat of emotional trauma. If not addressed, the mental stress of this natural disaster could manifest itself later with unnaturally disastrous results: drug and alcohol dependency, major depression, psychological problems, inability to hold down a job, poor coping skills.

Fortunately for 1,500 students in Alexandria, Louisiana, salvation has come in the form of two women, one weekend and a book.

Steffanie Lorig and Jeanean Jacobs of the Seattle-based nonprofit Art with Heart traveled to the storm-ravaged region one weekend in October to train teachers, administrators and school counselors to recognize and deal with symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome in the children of Alexandria, the student population of which doubled as hurricane refugees fled north from the coast.

With the help of donations, Lorig and Jacobs left 1,500 copies of their co-authored 9/11-inspired workbook called *Chill & Spill: A Place to Put It Down and Work It Out*, which was designed to help children and teens identify, process and heal from trauma. The need was evident.

Lorig and Jacobs spent one day at a shelter spending time with the refugee children. Jacobs was doing one of the exercises from *Chill & Spill* out loud with a group of older children. She asked them to finish the sentence "I want..."

"I want a car," one child said. "I want money," said another. The list of material desires went on in a raucous fashion until, amidst the din, a small voice stood out saying "I wish my parents hadn't died in the hurricane."

"Even people with extensive art experience had forgotten about the therapeutic value of expression through art," said Lorig, Art with Heart's founder and executive director. The training was a reminder that they can do more than just keep the swell of children busy. They can change their lives.

The workbook has exercises to help open the lines of communication and allow the healing nature of art work its magic in the hearts and minds of the affected children, some of which have experienced non-storm related problems as well.

"They've been dealing with historical trauma," Lorig said. "The hurricane is not the first terrible thing to happen to them."



Art Therapist and co-author of *Chill & Spill*, Jeanean Jacobs, works with young hurricane victims in the shelter.

At the shelter, Lorig sat with a young child who pointed out a girl in another of Art with Heart's workbooks titled *Oodles of Doodles*. She said the girl was a princess. "My daddy calls me a princess. He's in prison for killing a woman."

"The depth of crisis that these kids are experiencing is amazing," Lorig said.

School counselors said some children are not fed over the weekend. They only eat at school. Others staying at the shelter haven't seen their parents since they got there. They were neglected at home and they are neglected still.

"With so much trauma, these kids are at risk for post-traumatic stress syndrome," Lorig said.

Chill & Spill takes the kids on a journey. It begins light but slowly delves deeper into the issues teaching about emotional triggers and how to respond rationally, how to reprocess. It also encourages looking ahead, setting goals and planning for the future. Here is an example of one of the exercises called "Exclusive Interview":

You are a reporter for a celebrity magazine. Interview yourself and write an article about who you are. Make sure to ask some of these important questions:

- What are your talents and strengths?
- What really bothers you?
- What advice would you give someone else in the same situation?
- What is the most important thing in your life right now?
- What things are you most proud of?
- Where do you want to be in 10 years and what will you be doing?
- If you could change the world in one way, what would you do and why?

With the help of counselors and the exercises in *Chill & Spill*, the hope is that these children will be able to sidestep the further trauma of debilitating psychological problems and create a bright future for themselves, and maybe the world.

Art with Heart was started by Lorig in 1996 as the community outreach branch of the American Institute of Graphic Artists (AIGA) with the purpose of linking members with the community. In 2003, Art with Heart obtained status as a charitable 501(c)3 nonprofit organization and broadened its scope to benefit youth on a local and national basis through publications and workshops.

Art with Heart's eighth annual auction and dinner, "A Bright and Colorful Future," will be held Nov. 4 at 5:30 p.m. at the W Hotel in Seattle. **To learn more about Art with Heart, to make a donation or to reserve auction tickets, please visit www.artwithheart.org, call (206) 362-4047 or e-mail auction@artwithheart.org.**