Chapter 16
Engaging Communities through an Art Program at a Domestic Violence Shelter

Elzbieta T. Kazmierczak
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter is a case study, written from the perspective of a visual artist, designer, and educator, reflecting on a five-year volunteer initiative of developing, leading, and funding an art program at a domestic violence shelter for battered women and adolescent girls who experienced sexual violence. One purpose of this chapter is to provide information about establishing art programs that can be sustained by the institutions in which they are introduced. This chapter discusses the following aspects: 1) breaking the ice and establishing rapport; 2) training and supervising staff and student volunteers; 3) fund-raising, grant writing, and seeking support both within and outside the agency; 4) partnering with organizations or community groups to set up art exhibitions; 5) partnering with artists and writers to print and distribute an educational publication; and 6) developing research with vulnerable populations serviced by the agency.

INTRODUCTION

This case study presents a thick description (Geertz, 1973, pp. 9–10) of my experience of establishing and leading an art program at a domestic violence (DV) shelter that provides services to battered women and their children as well as to adolescent girls who have experienced sexual violence. Although this chapter focuses on a grassroots agency in the rural Midwest, many of the lessons presented will be applicable to a broad range of communities and institutional partnerships. To that end, this chapter offers a narrative of the people and events of this five-year journey, focusing on the following aspects: how it proceeded, what problems were faced, where the principal sources of support came from, and what insights were gained. For readers who are thinking about including art in their civic engagement endeavors, these considerations will give a sense of what to expect, what the reasonable goals are, what the organizational problems are, and how to negotiate or overcome them.

This chapter describes the essential steps and strategies I took for initiating and developing an expressive art program to complement individual and group counseling, case management, and life-skills development provided within a residential environment of an emergency shelter for battered women and their children as well as to complement non-residential short-term trauma intervention with sexually violated youth. The objectives of such a program were to facilitate the empowerment of survivors of domestic and sexual violence through art-based methods and to develop an educational outreach strategy, which included advocacy against gender-based violence. In order to accomplish these programmatic goals, essential aspects had to be addressed, ranging from the development of a treatment plan, the training and supervision of staff and student volunteers, and fund-raising and grant writing, to publishing, website development, and group art exhibitions, including a touring art collection.

Incorporating a new program into an existing and tightly functioning organizational structure can pose a challenge that can trigger resistance at a number of levels; recognition of this fact cannot be overemphasized. The new program can be construed as irrelevant or threatening to the status quo instead of being embraced as an asset. An investment of time, energy, and money that is needed to build a program can fuel the resistance, especially when the decision makers are not familiar with art methods, materials, and outcomes and lack the tools for judging the value of such a program. All of these can be difficult to accommodate in an overstretched organization, in which the providers are overworked and often experience secondary traumatic stress or compassion fatigue. The stress-induced reactions may include avoidance of the trauma stories or "feelings of horror, guilt, rage, grief, detachment, or dread, and may possibly lead to burnout and countertransference" (Simpson & Starkey, 2006, p. 1). Hence, this chapter addresses the vulnerabilities of a new program introduced with an objective to being sustained by an agency. The chapter emphasizes the critical importance of building collaborations, fostering participation, and gaining and maintaining support of staff, when there is little or no initial support from the management of an organization.

This case study shows how the development of initiatives like this program can achieve success (a) by starting small, working with a few staff members and against the disbelief that art activities can be an effective therapeutic modality; (b) by making the program visible; and (c) by building a consensus on the unique contributions of the program not only as a powerful method for healing and recovery but also as the clients' favorite program.

In addition to describing strategies for establishing an art program, this chapter introduces a theoretical and ethical framework of the Art for Empowerment (A4E) program, as it relates to the hosting agency's mission statement. Hence, this chapter will equip readers with both the strategies helpful in developing similar programs and a system of assumptions, principles, and relationships posited to guide the practice. It includes examples of artwork and recommends specific problem-solving strategies. Although artists, educators, or public service leaders might introduce and initiate an art program at a social service agency, they are outsiders, and their initiatives can be sustained only for as long as they remain involved, running a risk that the agency might not commit itself to investing in the program. This chapter describes the lessons I learned from guiding a particular midwestern agency toward developing a sense of ownership of the initiative and sustaining it without further involvement of the outsiders who put the idea in motion.

An important principle that this chapter addresses is the necessity of understanding the specific cognitive and emotional needs and characteristics of the populations that are to benefit from the new program. Although such familiarity is essential to the effectiveness of an art program, it does not guarantee it. Because of the dual nature of the services provided by the agency described in this chapter—that is, as a

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