



For Good

Student with tough time communicating? Art Expression helps

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Art, says Angela Lowden, founder of [Art Expression](#), can bring students of different abilities and social groups together. “They are able to express themselves, value each other’s differences and see each other in a very different light, and often they become friends,” Lowden says.

Art Expression, a Mt. Lebanon nonprofit, got its start in 2001 when Lowden approached her school district with the idea of bringing art therapists, although not strictly art therapy, to help students improve their social skills and problem solving, learn confidence, become independent, and even discover how to react to bullying appropriately.

“We use art therapists as our art facilitators because they are sensitive to our students’ needs,” says Lowden, an Art Institute graduate who also has a teaching degree from Duquesne University. Art Expression has a variety of programs, including one that focuses on STEAM (science, technology, engineering, the arts and math) to enhance students' academic skills while they're having fun with art materials.

In April, Art Expression was named one of 50 finalists for the National Arts and Humanities Youth Program Award by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, chosen from among more than 300 nominees from 49 states.

Today, the organization is in seven school districts in four counties, as well as community centers and a dozen homeless shelters.

“When I walk into a shelter,” says one of the nonprofit's art facilitators, Cheryl Silinskas, “I know that I am walking into a group that is experiencing crisis. The kids aren’t 100 percent aware of what is happening, but they know things aren’t working at home.

“Sometimes what surfaces through art is that, oh, here’s a child who experienced a death in the family and no one at the school knows about it.”

The kids value that Silinskas and her colleagues are available to them, she says. “This is their great opportunity to be in a school setting ... and be able to deal with what is weighing on them.”

In school classrooms, adds Silinskas, “often they will talk about what is happening in their lives, things that during the school day they need to express and that really has nowhere to go.”

“We see a lot of children of divorce as well” in classrooms, says Lowden, “and they are able to express their stress.”

The art, adds Silinskas, “is all about making mistakes and getting through that. They’re always thrown when I come in and begin, ‘I’m going to teach you to make the worst possible painting.’ It shifts their focus” from trying to be perfect in school at all times.

“They feel peaceful after these sessions ...,” says Lowden, “and the teachers are amazed as well. They make great teams, the teachers and our art facilitators.”

Art Expression is seeking new school district partners in more rural and urban districts, says Lowden: “I believe in helping all children” – especially, she adds, “because those children don’t get the services the children get in suburban areas.”

Writer: [Marty Levine](#)

Sources: Angela Lowden and Cheryl Silinskas, Art Expression