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## Promoting Resiliency Through the Arts: An Interview with Art Expression Inc.'s Angela Lowden

The social isolation that can be experienced by students with special needs places them at a higher risk for depression and anxiety, according to Margaret Ellis McKenna, MD, Senior Fellow in Developmental-Behavioral Pediatrics at Medical University of South Carolina.

“We’re in a mental health crisis today,” said Angela Lowden, Executive Director and Co-founder of Art Expression, Inc. “There are so many children that we encounter that are depressed, that are anxious. They’re overwhelmed and lonely and feel isolated and stressed out.”

October 10<sup>th</sup> is World Mental Health Day. World Mental Health Day was established in 1992 by the World Federation for Mental Health to support advocates and educate the public about mental health.

Art Expression Inc. addresses the social isolation of students with special needs by offering inclusive after-school programs that combine art with academic enrichment and social-emotional learning.

The program began with one middle school in 2001. Since then, Art Expression Inc. has served more than 11,000 students in seven counties in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area.

Students build relationships with their peers, as well as the teachers and workshop facilitators. These relationships become part of important community building that extends beyond the classroom into every area of students’ lives.

Many of the Art Expression Inc. participants find a home in “art club,” after being excluded from many other school activities.

For Lowden, art programming is the natural solution for children experiencing depression and anxiety. Art provides a safe place for children to process big emotions.

“We’ve encountered children that are trying to recover from grief, the grief of a classmate who has committed suicide,” Lowden said. “Some children in our class are on suicide watch, others are feeling extremely depressed and isolated, so our program is crucial to their well-being and development.”

All of Art Expression Inc.'s programs are facilitated through partnerships. Art and music therapists work as co-facilitators with those who know the children best, such as teachers and counselors.

The combination of art therapists with teachers and counselors often encourage children to talk more freely about challenges they may be experiencing. Students have disclosed information to teachers and counselors in art sessions that might not otherwise have come to light. This has helped students receive the help they need.

Art Expression Inc.'s programs utilize components of art and music therapy. Lowden states that those components, such as problem solving, self-reflection, identifying strengths in yourself and others and building social skills are very powerful tools to bring people together and change lives.

In addition to their work in the schools, Art Expression Inc. conducts programming in homeless shelters in the Pittsburgh area.

Lowden emphasizes the importance of reaching children while they are in the midst of adverse experiences such as homelessness. She asserts that arts programming can be used to teach good coping skills as students face challenging circumstances.

Social-emotional learning through the arts fosters resiliency for students that will serve them well as adults, Lowden said. Many of the children in Art Expression Inc.'s programs live in households with substance abuse.

"We do not want children to self-medicate," Lowden said. "We want children to reach for a paintbrush or pick up the phone and ...talk to someone [they] trust."

One program that combines art, academic enrichment and social-emotional learning is ARTchitecture: Building Bridges.

The Art Expression Inc. program builds on Pittsburgh's history as the bridge capitol of the world. The workshop facilitators build on the math, engineering and artistic skills inherent in bridge design to provide academic enrichment through arts integrated learning.

Concurrently, facilitators use the concrete aspects of bridge design to open up metaphorical discussions to promote social-emotional learning. Students can build actual bridge models while learning to reach out and build bridges to each other.

Art Expression Inc's programs are tied to Pittsburgh's history in another way, as well. Lowden explained that, during its inception, Art Expression Inc. organizers sought the expertise of Dr. Judith Rubin. Rubin is best known as the "Art Lady" on *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*, which filmed in Pittsburgh.

Art Expression Inc.'s classes are process-based.

"People think you need to be a very good artist to be involved in the arts and that's not true," Lowden said. "Art comes in many forms."

For Lowden, the art, like life, doesn't have to be perfect. And the process of making the art is beneficial as well.

"I think honoring their art allows the students to feel a sense of respect," said art therapist Susan Novak. "Modeling how to comment on and compliment the art of others allows them to begin to feel respected by their classmates instead of being in competition with them. Insults are replaced by curiosity and compliments."

These inclusive art programs help students build relationships, develop empathy and learn coping skills. Students who participate in such classes are better able to manage their emotions, problem-solve and are better equipped to face challenges in all areas of their lives.

Lowden would love to see programs like those in Art Expressions Inc. replicated across the United States. She also emphasizes the need for foundations, corporations, schools and government agencies to support these vital programs to help all students develop resiliency.

“Arts can bring people together,” Lowden said. “The arts level the playing field,”