

My job: Sense of the bigger picture

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By Angela McCarthy

Name: Carrie Skinner

Age: 37

Role: Registered arts therapist and founder of Arts Therapy New Zealand Trust.

Average salary: Sliding scale of \$70 to \$120 an hour, depending on experience.

Qualifications and institution: Master of Arts in Arts Therapy (Clinical) from Whitecliffe College of Arts and Design.

Describe what you do.

I am an arts therapist working mainly with children and young people. I use visual arts with clients to help them express their thoughts and emotions, to work through and come to terms with various life experiences to help them move forward with their lives.

For example, often children, especially if they've suffered abuse, find it either too hard or scary to express themselves verbally, so I get them to create artworks around those feelings.

The initial part of the process is getting to know your client. This might involve asking them to draw a self-portrait or do an artwork centred on three favourite things.

You can get a pretty clear picture from a client's response. Then we start talking about the images created. Usually in the beginning people find it easier to talk about a picture and relate it to themselves, rather than talk directly about themselves.

Once it (the experience/feeling/issue) is out and contained on the page, the client is then encouraged to make meaning of what they've done. Some clients move quite quickly into deeper areas; others can take lots of sessions.

Where do your clients come from?

I work with private clients and also take referrals from Child Youth and Family teams, including the permanency team, and the Korowai Manaaki Youth Justice North Centre.

Our trust also runs after-school creativity programmes and holiday therapeutic arts programmes. The after-school programmes include painting, collage, clay, drawing, video and photography. Our holiday programmes also include movement, music-making and drama.

Are these programmes arts therapy?

There are two main approaches to arts therapy - "art as therapy" and "art psychotherapy". I use a mix of these approaches with young people. The children's creativity programmes are based on "art as therapy"; the belief that by doing something creative a person experiences therapeutic benefits.

So, with this approach, the children don't think they're "doing" therapy, but they all get something out of it, such as, higher self-esteem, greater self-confidence, alternative forms of self-expression and communication, and problem-solving skills.

Your history?

I did a degree in visual communications in Sydney, majoring in film and worked in film and television in Australia as a freelance producer and production manager, mainly doing TV commercials and photo-shoots. I always did painting as well and attended short art courses.

I continued doing this when I came to New Zealand in 1999. I also started running a children's art group and then a local after-school arts group.

At this point I decided I needed a change from television production.

I was keen to follow my interests in children, art and psychology but I wasn't sure how to go about it. After exploring online, I eventually found Whitecliffe's arts therapy qualification.

What sort of training or experience is important?

I did Whitecliffe's two-year master's degree in arts therapy, plus a third clinical year. The clinical year includes supervision and supervised placement and experience in a range of environments, such as eating disorder services, Child Youth and Family, mental health and special needs. Altogether you need 750 clinical hours, of which 600 hours have to be from your third year.

What skills and qualities do you need?

You don't necessarily need an arts background, but you need a strong interest in arts, music, movement and/or psychology. You need to be inquiring and hold the belief that art is therapeutically beneficial. You need the ability to listen and to develop a trusting relationship with clients.

When working with children, you need lots of patience and the ability to have fun. You must have passion for what you're doing.

Best part of the job?

Art can provide a very subconscious response that is very different from what is verbally stated initially.

It is great when your client starts making sense of what they're expressing visually.

Most challenging part?

Convincing people arts therapy is worthwhile and advocating its worth to the public, funders and agencies.

Interesting projects on the go?

I'm evaluating an eight-week arts therapy pilot programme we ran for at-risk youth, called ARTiculate. It was run with a group of alternative education students from Youthline.

Advice to others interested in arts therapy?

Find out more about it. Look into Whitecliffe's course, websites, or ANZATA (<http://anzata.org/mambo/>) (Australia, New Zealand Arts Therapy Association) and other international sites. Start doing workshops in arts therapy to experience it yourself and get an understanding of how it works. However, it is not easy to find full-time work in New Zealand. There is only one full-time arts therapist position in Auckland, although there are several part-time positions

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http://www.nzherald.co.nz/employment/news/article.cfm?c_id=11&objectid=10594577&pnum=0