

SE student shares lessons learned with weather victims

Jan Stumbo collecting art supplies to help children deal with tragedy

by **Charity Montieth**
reporter

Through the world of art, one student is making a difference in the lives of children—by helping them heal one paintbrush at a time.

SE student Jan Stumbo is a self-taught artist and the founder of the Soul Art Project, a non-profit organization that allows children in shelters to deal with their emotions using crayons, paint, scissors and glue.

With the Christmas holidays approaching, Stumbo is currently sponsoring a drive through which she hopes to send art supplies to 100 sheltering agencies. A collection box will be set up outside the student activities office on SE Campus.

Any art supplies or paper will be accepted, but Stumbo said her greatest need is for watercolor sets and paper, paintbrushes, double-sided tape and small art sets the children can take home.

“When you take a kid toys or art supplies to a shelter, it just brightens their spirit and their days,” she said. “That’s so important, especially this time of year.”

Stumbo said she first realized art’s healing powers in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. After watching news reports, she said she loaded up her art supplies and went to The Salvation Army’s Life Center in Arlington.

“I walked into a room of 200 people and just said ‘Who wants to paint?,’” she said.

Thirty children, many of whom had been separated from their families, signed up that day. Stumbo split them into groups of eight to 10, and just let them paint. The children chose mostly dark colors, reflective of their emotional state, she said.

Although Stumbo said most of the children were quiet and emotionless as they painted, she believes having the avenue to express their feelings on paper was a positive experience that instills hope in them.

Stumbo recalled a young girl who she thought was painting a black butterfly.

“When I commented on her butterfly, she told me it was actually one of the bodies she saw floating in the water,” Stumbo said. “That moment made my heart stand still.”

Stumbo said as she worked with the children, she realized this was her purpose. So she enrolled in TCC’s Women in New Roles program. She said the program helped her find her passion and focus her dream, crediting Rachel Howell for her success.

“Some people never find their passion. For me to find it and apply it within my work, it’s golden,” she said.

Stumbo’s passion was recently showcased nationally on the Veria network’s *Art of Living* series. Since it ran on Thanksgiving, she has received numerous e-mails inquiring about how to help. She also posted the program on YouTube, and in just a week, it has gotten 350 hits.

Stumbo’s vision for the Soul Art Project includes a studio where she can teach various classes and showcase the children’s work. Eventually, she would like to incorporate a computer and resource center with Internet access for the parents to use.

“You have to be able to help the parents first,” she said. “Once you help the parents, the parents can help the children.”

In the meantime, she continues to work at shelters, based out of her home studio. The colorful one-room studio is decorated with the children’s art and Stumbo’s own art. Markers, paints, glitter, stencils and stamps for the children to use fill every corner and cubby hole of the room. She teaches impromptu art and creative writing classes to get the children started.

“I’ll ask them ‘If you had a million dollars, what would you do?’ And the kids can either draw or write, as long as they are expressing,” she said.

She also makes art journals out of watercolor paper for the children, another outlet geared toward positively expressing their fears and anxieties.

“Every kid needs a journal like this. It can be as simple as just putting pictures in it,” she said.

Once the children have finished their masterpieces, they have the option to keep it. But when the art session is over, Stumbo tries to give the children art supplies, if only a small basket of crayons and a journal, to take with them, so they can continue to express.

“Some of these kids have lost everything, and their parents are focused on putting the pieces back together,” she said. “If the kids can focus on art, that may make it just a little easier for the parents.”

Some of the art supplies have been bought by Stumbo, many come from donations. Although she said one of the hardest items to get is watercolor paper, she will use anything she can get her hands on.

“I went to OK Paper and got bits of scrap paper,” she said. “I even went to an interior decorator, who gave me books of wallpaper samples.”

Stumbo used those pre-cut bits of paper and wallpaper and turned them into bookmarks. After the children



Photos courtesy Jan Stumbo

Children displaced by the flooding in Weatherford display their art work they created as an exercise in releasing pent-up emotions or fears. SE Campus student Jan Stumbo took art supplies to Shirley Hall Elementary, where the children and their families were staying, to help the children have fun.



Art by one of the young artists participating in Stumbo's goodwill project.

decorate them, Stumbo sells them for a small fee, using the proceeds to buy more art supplies.

Some of the donations to the Soul Art Project have been made by the very people Stumbo aims to help.

After the spring rains drenched the area, Stumbo loaded up her supplies and headed to Horseshoe Bend, an area devastated by floods. There she met Ken Bryant.

Bryant's home had been destroyed by floods, and he had nine people living on his front porch with no electricity. Stumbo left supplies for the children, but also went to a local restaurant to ask them to donate food to the people in the neighborhood.

When Stumbo returned to the neighborhood to drop off the food, she said Bryant handed her a check for \$500 and told her to further her mission.

"Here these people were on Horseshoe Bend, that were pretty much flooded," she said. "They were giving me money to help me out, and it just turned into something beautiful."

She said moments like those that keep her motivated so the Soul Art Project can continue to get art supplies to the kids.

"We need to build better communities, with more mentors," she said. "If we had more places for kids to deal with their problems, they won't feel they need to turn to drugs."

Stumbo's greatest challenge has been funding. She said she refuses to give up, even if she can help only one child at a time deal with change and adversity.

"It takes time, little baby steps," she said. "But that's my mission."

A SE Campus reception to honor Stumbo and her accomplishments is in the planning stages and will be announced at a later date.

For more information about the Soul Art Project, visit www.janboarts.com. Art supplies can be donated outside the SE Campus student activities office.

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