

METRO

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Photos help troubled teens put the world in perspective



TAYLOR | PHOTOGRAPHY PERSPECTIVE PROJECT

A bent sign in Tremont captured the attention of Taylor, 15, one of the participants of the Photo Perspective Project. She doesn't see it as a scary photo but says that other people have told her the shadow looks like a gun.



SARANDOS PIPINIAS | PHOTOGRAPHY PERSPECTIVE PROJECT

Project participant Sarandos Pipinias, 18, took a different approach while shooting a self-portrait. He says the project has helped him become more comfortable with trusting others.



ANGUS | PHOTO PERSPECTIVE PROJECT

"Depression is something that runs in my family," says program participant Angus, 18, who captured this chess game as part of a photo assignment on foreground vs. background. "I've struggled with depression all my life."



ANGUS | PHOTO PERSPECTIVE PROJECT

An umbrella at a cafe caught the eye of Angus, 18, during an excursion to downtown Cleveland. "Photography shows us that there's no normal way to look at the world," he says.

Fairview Hospital mental health project uses photography as a therapeutic tool

TERESA CHIN
Plain Dealer Reporter

When the six teenagers in Fairview Hospital's yearlong Photo Perspective Project talk about adjusting their focus, they aren't speaking technically.

They all have been treated for mental health problems, including severe depression, social phobia and autism spectrum disorders. Their doctors recommended them for the program in conjunction with other treatment. Since last summer they have met weekly to learn photography, take pictures and talk about their feelings. Equipped with new tools, the teens

say that they are finally able to let their stories be heard — and seen — so that others know that they are not alone.

Fifteen-year-old Taylor holds a small point-and-shoot digital camera in one hand and in the other, a manila envelope filled with photos she has taken during the past year, some of which will be showcased tonight at the Serafino Gallery in Little Italy. Her eyes are downcast as she starts to describe the night two years ago when her dad died of a stroke.

It was 3 o'clock in the morning when she found him, says Taylor, who asked to be identified by only her first name.

SEE PHOTOS | B5

Photo Perspective Project

When: 7 p.m. today

Where: Serafino Gallery, 11917 Mayfield Road (Little Italy), Cleveland

Information: 216-721-1025

Coming soon: Future exhibits are in the works in Tremont and Ohio City.

cleveland.com/healthfit

 See videos of the teens telling their stories.

PHOTOS

FROM B1

Photos help teens put world in perspective

She called 9-1-1 and the ambulance came to take him away. He never woke up.

It took a while for her to realize he was gone forever, but when she did, it hit her hard. She started giving up on everything, she says, and nine months later attempted suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills. A friend called the police, and Taylor spent three days at Fairview Hospital. That's when she heard about the photo project.

The program, led by Dr. Molly Wimbiscus, Fairview's child and adolescent psychology fellow, was something of an experiment: a mix of art therapy, behavioral group therapy and community-building. Each teen was given a digital camera and taught a new photography skill each week. The group went on local field trips. They talked about their photos and what they meant to them.

The project was funded by a one-time \$3,000 grant. Wimbiscus thought that the creative aspect of the project would help teens — who tend to have poor attendance in group therapy —

stay engaged and build confidence.

"Mental health is a topic that's hard for a lot of people to open up about," says Wimbiscus. "We didn't want to force the kids to talk about their feelings, but there seemed to be natural crossover with so many aspects of photography." Light and dark. Contrast. Perspective.

Just as Wimbiscus had hoped, what started out as a lesson about art quickly became a discussion about how the project applied to the participants' lives.

"Taking pictures from different angles showed them how if you don't like what you're looking at, you can turn your head and change your point of view," Wimbiscus says. "That's a very meaningful coping mechanism."

The project immediately appealed to Taylor, who was already interested in photography. "I'm not really good at using words, but with pictures it's easy to describe myself," she says. "Pictures don't judge. They just show what's there."

Photography gave 18-year-old Sarandos Pipinias, who has fought depression, another way to deal with his emotions.

"If I'm sad, I can take a picture of something black," he says. "If I'm happy I can take a picture of something yellow. It's up to me."

Before the project started, Pipinias — like many of the teens

— was anxious about meeting new people. "But now [the group is] like family to me," he says.

The group's playful dynamic is apparent at its final meeting. The teens smile and write nice things to each other on colorful pieces of paper. They reminisce, share inside jokes and swap glossy photography stills. They talk about wanting to keep in touch, sometimes so adamantly it's as if they're worried the friendships are too good to be true.

It would be easy to forget that they are not the carefree teens they appear to be, but Wimbiscus knows better.

"One minute they seem fine, but [adolescence is] a very volatile time," she says. "Everything can change so fast for them. I do worry about what will happen after this project ends."

In the corner of the meeting room sits 16-year-old Heather (who asked that her real name not be used). Her photo portfolio is full of color — a close-up of her favorite watercolor paints, a pink splash of bleeding heart flowers from the Cleveland Botanical Garden.

Heather says she was in eighth grade when she first started thinking about suicide, and she attempted it a year later after a bad breakup. Shortly before the group's final meeting,

Heather attempted suicide again.

This might call the success of the photography project into question, but Cleveland-based child and adolescent psychologist Ellen F. Casper, who is not associated with the program, says that a suicide reattempt does not necessarily mean the program was a failure.

"Psychology is not an exact science," she says. "Whether it's in individual therapy, group therapy or with medication, you never have complete control over what a person will do. It's more complicated than that. If these kids felt like they gained a support system, that's a huge achievement."

After the group heard about Heather, they visited her in the hospital. At the final meeting, Heather shared what it meant to her.

"When I go through dark periods in my life, I feel like all there is is pain," she says. "I'm still learning to love myself."

"[But] I feel so accepted here in a way that I never feel accepted in another place," she says. "It makes me want to open up and be myself. You've helped me through so much."

She doesn't explain how. She doesn't have to.

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PHOTOS HELP TROUBLED TEENS PUT THE WORLD IN PERSPECTIVE by
Teresa Chin

One of the greatest challenges I experienced during my time as a Kaiser Health Intern was weighing how to report on the issue of teen depression. My editor had asked me to cover the Photo Perspective Project -- a local clinic-run program where psychologists and media professionals worked with teenagers who had been hospitalized for mental health issues. The kids ranged from 16 to 18-years-old. Most had attempted suicide at least once.

When I walked into the room to meet them for the first time, I wasn't sure this story was such a good idea. What would they think of a nosy reporter asking them intensely personal and probably painful questions about their past? A few moments before I addressed the group, the lead psychologist informed me that one girl, let's call her "Heather," had just rejoined the project after re-attempting suicide a few days before. As my eyes flickered over the red and yellow hospital bracelets that she still wore on her wrists, and she stared back at me with smoky-rimmed eyes, my doubts almost overcame me.

Then she smiled.

The next few hours consisted of some of the most powerful interviews of my time at the Plain Dealer. I had brought a video camera with me, thinking I could have them talk about their photos, but the teens were adamant that they wanted to share their personal stories of depression on camera. In the end, a few didn't want their faces shown. Heather, for example, only wanted to show her arms. In the end, I chose to produce three separate individual videos for the piece, which helped to capture the depth of the story and its significance for the people involved.

I had a bit of a moral dilemma on whether or not to use the teens' full names. On the one hand, it was a powerful expression of ownership over their personal stories for the teens who wanted to share. On the other hand, their names, once on the internet, would become searchable to future employers, and could have profound professional consequences. In the end, my editor and I decided to include full names in the print piece for the teens who were 18 or over, and in the non-searchable video for teens who were under-18 and whose parents had signed a waiver.

Although this was supposed to be a quick metro piece, it ended up being a strong multimedia package that touched on larger issues of teen mental health. I felt privileged to report on such an important topic.

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