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Columbus, Nebraska 68601

January 27, 2020

Doug Zbylut
Department of Health & Human Services
Panel Committee to approve funding for art therapy in the State of Nebraska

Dear Doug, DHHS, and the Panel Committee,

I am writing today to support, advocate, and offer witness of benefits of art therapy to encourage the approval of funding for the art therapist licensing bill. Being supportive of the arts isn't something I was born with during my upbringing in Platte County. It wasn't until I moved away from Nebraska did I learn that the arts and the art community wasn't really about what we were taught in our youth ... we were taught the arts is ONLY for those *finity* people and you were to *never* go into an art gallery. *To me, this was a false belief based on narrow-mindedness.* Since then I've learned that the arts, ALL the arts, are something to brush up against, at minimum, so we know how much of a human being we are. Which means, what is the depth of our human development or are we shallow people and fearful of the different? And, what is the width of our knowledge of different personalities and cultures or ... does the term narrow-minded describe us? What I am saying is that I believe we as Midwesterners, in general, don't see any value with the arts and to not spend any time with them. I am writing today to say there is great value in the arts and there is great value in art therapy.

The arts, especially painting, is a porthole to a chamber of the past where distraught, scarred, or traumatized childhoods are embedded in the memory vault of our adult minds. For many of us, this childhood memory vault is buried in sand and covered with cornstalks and Cottonwood branches; we don't want to deal with it so we bury it. Burying the memory is an analogy to our adulthood telling ourselves "those childhood things are ridiculous and definitely DON'T need to be talked about. Talking about that stuff makes a person weak". A very false belief.

There is a need for MANY art therapists in every state of the union, and Nebraska has the chance to be the leader on this topic, just as we have been the leader on many other topics. In my experience as an engineer in Nebraska, many national companies solve problems by looking at how their Nebraska counterparts solve problems, how we address issues. Nebraskans often have the best solution to common problems and we can show our leadership by approving funding for this bill.

I'm guessing the target crowd for the art therapy is for people in the DHHS system, but I can see every company and factory having an "art program" for many reasons ... to create a less hostile work environment, to widen the understanding of the narrow-minded workers, improving job retention of new workers by keeping a loud mouth quiet with an art discussion, decreasing tension in meeting rooms with rooms adorned with art; among other reasons. *The need for art therapists in our country is on an upward trajectory.*

WITNESS OF BENEFITS OF ART THERAPY AND HOW IT CHANGED MY LIFE

I moved away from Nebraska at 24 years old to Missouri and then to Tennessee at 30 years old, but making many visits back to Nebraska during that time and then finally returning to Nebraska for good in 2009. My move away from Nebraska was for personal growth because (in hindsight) the past was pulling me to the grave. At 32 years old I became homeless and lived in the stairwell of an abandoned building and a rescue mission for five months. I'm telling you this because there were a lot of things bothering me *that I didn't know were bothering me in the first place.* Throughout these decades, I was going to traditional therapists on a regular basis and not having much breakthrough.

In 2012, I obtained the best paying, best benefits engineering job I've ever had here in Nebraska. By the way, a few years after my homelessness, I earned my bachelors degree in engineering at Tennessee Tech University ... a very difficult task in many ways. But ... *that good paying engineering job ended very harshly after ten months as my life was sinking with suicidal thoughts. Life was very dark; life was officially a foreign language to me.* I went to a traditional therapists, but ... what a waste of money (to me anyway at that time).

Traditional therapy is sitting in the therapist's office talking about things or issues of the past, things we have stuffed in our own attic in our mind letting them get covered with dust and cornstalks, hiding them. The therapist asks you to paint the details of what happened by recalling the event or tragedy from memory *while sitting in her office.*

Art therapy is like taking a handheld canvas and *going upstairs into the attic and physically bumping into those issues seeing the details of what happened long ago.* It seems the artistic process just naturally lets a person "bump into things" in the dark attic, the childhood memory chamber. The magic of art therapy is like shining the light of our cell phone on the things so we can see the details. Even for the beginner painter, there is trust between us and a blank canvas; the canvas has no hidden agenda nor does it take notes. We discover things we may have forgotten about or the details of an event. We shine the light with one hand and then reach down with the other to slowly wipe the dust off. We take more swipes at the dust and cornstalks thinking "why is this here, it happened such a long time ago? Is this still bothering me?"

We can then take notes for ourselves on the canvas by making shapes or just brush strokes. We discover those scars and traumas weighing us down as if we had to walk through life pulling a gunny sack over our shoulders that is a hundred yards long and thirty-three yards wide; too much to be dragging through this complicated world. Being up in the attic with canvas in hand, we begin to acknowledge the past in a different way. In traditional therapy you are sitting there in a chair of her office *living in the past by trying to recall details* but yet seemingly protecting what is buried there ... because another human is *telling you* to think about them. In art therapy, we live in the now by painting.

Art therapy forces us to live in the now because we have a paint brush in hand, pushing and pulling paint on the surface while an art therapist begins to talk about the past, and the present, and living in the now. We think about the past different than when we sit in an office. We think about what to paint and soon enough the pain is transferred to the canvas in a form only we understand while we relive those memories and realizing they needed to be addressed. The art therapist is not forcing us to think about something specific; she gently directs us over that childhood memory vault in our mind and lets us discover the issues and mental scars and traumas on our own. We are *living in the now and yet dusting off something from the past; carefully remembering details vividly and caressing the issue saying "I have to let this go for me"*. The movement of our hand with the brush, with the paint on it, moving towards the blank canvas, makes the therapy real and effective".

Basically, we become more active in our own personal growth in a much more efficient way with a direct, "look down below" perspective, as opposed to looking afar. Being *in the now* allows us to dig deep to that buried vault bringing the issues to the surface. We look down and inward with a self-directed search mode of what it is that is hiding in the memory vault truly hampering our development. Traditional therapy is like reaching over a wall or trying to dig from a distant.

Another analogy is: traditional therapy points to the barn in the back of the acreage and says, "You know all those things in the past you have stored there in that barn, they are bothering you, *so tell me* what are the details about what happened?" Art therapy, as you guessed, is like trudging to the back of the acreage with canvas in hand, opening the door to the barn and putting our own hands on the hurt or disappointment learning how the past affects our lives today.

Painting is a medium for connecting to important parts of our lives we didn't know were important. In a story I wrote about in my memoir, the topic of how to divide time up between the past, the present, and the future was like a light bulb went off; it was one of the biggest lessons I've learned all of my life. And the art therapy class also led me to the largest project I've ever completed, one that changed my life forever, which will be explained at the very end.

The following is an excerpt from my memoir discussing an art workshop in Kearney titled "Art In The Park" held in Kearney's Yanney Park on April 3, 2013 by Art Therapist Linda M.

The excerpt is from:

Trees Grow; A Nebraskan Memoir (2013)

Chapter 36 REWIND, pages 154-155

The 10-80-10 Rule

One of the biggest lessons learned was at a workshop. The workshop used painting to help understand how a disorder can affect one's life. The lesson was this ... painting puts you "in the now."

It is extremely important to be living "in the now!" My first thought was "what the hell does that mean?"

I think most people take this for granted, but I didn't understand how to divide it up, no one had ever quantified the topic of living in the now with the past and the future.

The light bulb went on when the teacher relayed the information. She said, "It's a 10-80-10 rule!"

"Live ten percent in the future so you know what road you are going down, live ten percent in the past so you know where you've been, and live eighty percent in the now."

Eighty Percent?

Eighty Percent!!!

Eighty Percent?

No one had ever put numbers on this high level perspective of one's life. It seems I had always spent the smaller percent "in the now" and the rest would oscillate with the past and the future. It might be thirty percent in the past and sixty in the future or it might be forty in the past and forty in the future. Or even worse, it might be eighty percent in the past and twenty percent in the future. A human cannot function in the world if they spend 100% of their time *not* dealing with what is going on around them *right now*. It is very hard to keep a job when we can't focus.

The numbers changed weekly or daily or even hourly and the value for "in the now" always stayed a low number ... because I simply didn't know how. In high school, life was all about sports, hunting, fishing, and keeping a girlfriend. Learning how to socialize in all the other settings was foreign to me. I never talked much at all, ever.

The coffee job I had in Missouri helped break a lot of this because not only was I a salesman (having to talk), I became part of the local communities with social functions as I provided coffee service to these events. I also played my songs and sang in front of people for the first time. Something I thought I would never do. But having learned this 10-80-10 rule changed my life in a big way and opened the door for other breakthroughs too. Trees Grow.

MORE ON THE ART THERAPY CLASS

There were several exercises for the class; one was for our table of participants to make an easy sketch of something on construction paper with crayons. A picture of our table's collage is included at the end of this letter. Mine is the blue and red star. (To be honest, I forgot what the purpose of this exercise. The 10-80-10 rule kind of dominated my thinking for that day.)

Another exercise was to water color paint a painting with horizontal lines. Once again, I can't exactly remember the purpose of it other than it was a simple warm up exercise. A picture of the groups paintings are included at the end.

Another exercise in the art therapy class was to make a tinfoil "replica" of ourselves as a child; the exercise was more about connecting to your inner child than making a good replica. We gave it a decoration too for something symbolic. Then we took a paper plate and drew the child and wrote a few things we thought the child wanted us to hear. We also traced our hand and colored the hand with several emotions (colors). Each color represented something specific to me but I didn't write them down. The fourth part of this exercise was to draw something that was traumatic in our childhood with a simple sketch. A picture of that exercise is included at the end of this letter; the toy truck.

The topic for this last exercise ended up being something I would include in my memoir also, as it was acknowledged as being important enough to be included in the first draft; it was very good therapy to write the story out. Honestly, it was a stupid story of being denied a toy at six years old. But it was done in such a dramatic way between my mother and an aunt that I couldn't figure out why I didn't deserve the toy (remember I was six years old). The following is that story which ended up being removed from my memoir because it has led to embarrassment. There were five or six stories at the very beginning that led to a little to a lot of trauma growing up, but there are only four stories now.

Story #4 TOY TRUCK

My aunt knew her nephew wanted to take the toy truck home, and mom knew that my brothers and I had plenty of toys at home. So just before putting the

parked car in gear, mom looked in the back seat and saw the truck in my hands. She grabbed the toy from my hands and ran it up to the house, throwing it inside.

My aunt grabbed the truck from her living room floor, ran with it to our car and put it back into my hands through the window.

Mom grabbed the toy from my hands again, waited til my aunt got back inside and then set the truck on her front porch steps. Before we pulled away from the curb, my aunt grabbed the toy and placed the truck into my hands once again, yelling, "Let him take it home with him, my boys don't play with it anymore!"

Both of them furious now at their sister's actions it became a dramatic event to see in this child's eyes. For the final move, mom told me to roll up my window; one of my siblings must have rolled it up cause I was in shock at the ridiculousness of the event over a toy. Mom then grabbed the truck for the final time, ran around the car, and tossed the toy truck onto the lawn. Before my aunt could counter the move, the car was put in gear and we pulled away. I was around six years old.

About a week before the art therapy class, I was in Grand Island at an antique store and found a toy truck that loosely resembled the toy from childhood. This toy was wooden (\$4) and the one from long ago was metal. It's one of those things sitting on the mantle of wherever I'm living today ... just as a decorative piece. I don't share the reason for it to anyone.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, I'm sure from what you just read, you understand the importance to me of trying to live in the now; something I had never understood all of my life. The *other* big thing art therapy has done for me is that it gave me that spark to write a memoir. The growth I've gained by writing it has led to a huge symbolic change in my life to signify a new beginning, that's how worn down I was from living the past over and over, without ever really knowing I was doing so. So, at the end of my memoir I changed my name when the writing was completed, and timed it with the process of a legal name change. The memoir addressed the most significant trauma I've had in my life that played over and over, which was the loss of the family farm in 1984; as a fifteen year old I took responsibility for that loss. Having grieved that long over something that was clearly not my fault was ridiculous.

Writing it has been more therapeutic than all my other traditional therapy sessions combined ... well, I'm saying this to help you understand the significance. The last picture at the end of this letter is of me in that class. I felt a little ridiculous going to a class like that, but I'm sure glad I did.

Sincerely,

Formerly Mark Zak

Now, since 2013/2016, Zak Zarben