

The Healing Power of Art: A Creative Workshop for Survivors



Psalms 30:5 "Weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning."

Dear friends at the Swarthmore Presbyterian Church,

Thanks be to God for SPC's loving generosity in accompanying us in our journey to provide hope, healing and grace to the lives of young girls abused in our midst. Your gifts from last year's Alternative Christmas Shop helped us bring into fruition our desire to provide safe, joyful and empowering creative workshops in April and May.

There were two sets of workshops: one was organized last April for girls at the **Casa Esperanza** shelter who had been unable to live with their own families for safety and other reasons. Many of them have been abused by their own fathers and relatives. The center is able to provide basic needs such as food and shelter, and the girls go to a local school about 7 blocks from the shelter. The girls are transients at the shelter, although some have stayed there for more than 3 years now because no relatives or families have been identified to adopt them. The shelter has had for the

past 6 months a Peace Corps volunteer, Karen, who is helping out design learning activities for the girls who are unable to go to school because of some learning challenges.



Casa Esperanza girls posing with their constellation of dreams.



Coloring their stars

The workshop for Casa Esperanza centered on helping the girls visualize their dreams and hopes for themselves. Jean Cuanan-Nalam, a talented artist-trainer who also teaches at the Silliman University Divinity School's Liturgy and Music Center, headed the team that enabled the girls to articulate their hopes, what they perceived are some of the obstacles, and what

they resolved to do to overcome these hurdles. The girls composed the melody themselves, and Jean accompanied them along the way.

This is the translated version of their heartfelt song:

*We wish to join our families again
We wish to be able to live in peace
We wish to be able to work*

*But there are many problems in our homes
We are faced with frequent abuse
We are faced with poverty
Making it difficult to reach our dreams*

*That is why we resolve to find our strength
And to do our best at school
Rely on ourselves, our companions, and God.*

The girls were very proud for having composed their theme song. Simple words that resonated deeply with their experience, their feelings, and their faith. They continue to sing their song, while doing their daily routines, in many different occasions, reminding themselves of a common ground they share, the constellation of dreams that are works in progress.

The second workshop early in May was for girls being assisted by a non-government organization called **GWAVE**, or Gender Watch Against Violence and Exploitation. The girls came from various parts of the province and within Dumaguete City. We had to find a retreat center that can accommodate them for 3-4 days because it was too risky to ask them to return to their homes at the end of the day.



In my letter to Aunt Mary Ellen Lloyd, I wrote,

“And then they were there, some still very shy and quiet, others more outgoing. They laughed, sang, danced, wrote letters, sketched, watched movies, created their beaded necklaces, and at the end performed stories they created themselves. The stories were about friendship, about vigilance, about sacrifices.

There were simple exercises (like writing a letter to someone they missed a lot) that opened deep and intense emotions, their fears, their anger, their despair spilled out. Many tears were shared, but each hurt comforted by the sense of a shared concern, a gentle spirit of solidarity. It was poignant to see the girls encouraging one or two who thought they were not capable of performing for their final creative presentation. The care was genuine, each one mustering the courage, the patience and the love to remind each other that they must move on.



During the evaluation of the workshop, the girls were all radiant and ecstatic, their renewed energies shone, and they felt so positive about themselves. Having created their own pieces was a big accomplishment for them. They desire to do more, to create more, to slowly but steadily continue to redefine themselves. It was beautiful, and I want to convey how thankful we all are that you, friends at SPC, have made it possible to realize this.”

School has just started for many of the girls. Some of them feel discouraged in pursuing their education, especially those who find themselves in unsupportive environments, or simply are faced with dire poverty. If you wish to convey any message to them, you can email them to me, and I will gladly share it with them.

Please include them all in your prayers. The girls bear deep pains and burdens, but they are so full of life and promise. They are beautiful and fragile spirits. May God’s love and grace continue to surround and comfort them, and may we all be instruments to reflect God’s love in the many creative ways we share of ourselves.

God be with us all.

*Cobbie and Dessa Quesada-Palm, June 9, 2009
Dumaguete City*
