

# South Florida Art Therapists Offer Free Services in Aftermath of the Valentine's Day Shooting

*Raquel Farrell-Kirk, MS, ATR-BC  
March 1, 2018*

Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, MSD as it's often abbreviated, is less than an hour away from my home, only 30 minutes away from my office, and a mere mile from the Coral Springs Museum of Art, where I conduct a weekly art therapy open studio group for veterans. This proximity is how I came to receive a phone call from the museum's Executive Director, asking for guidance in setting up free art therapy services in the aftermath of the Valentine's Day shooting that left 17 dead. With only a couple days' notice, the art therapy community came together to create a safe, welcoming space where people from Parkland and surrounding communities could gather.



For four days (February 20-23), over twenty volunteer art therapists provided support to participants who made more than 120 drop-in visits to the museum's Healing through Art program. The museum's main art gallery served as a serene backdrop, surrounding visitors with sunlight streaming in through full length windows and surrounding them with inspirational artwork and sculptures.

The community came together in support during this time of need. There were days when music therapists joined us, adding



*(From left) AATA Board Member Lisa Wasserman, PsyD, ATR-BC, ATCS; FATA President Joseph Scarce, ATR-BC MFT; Isabel Perez, Coral Springs Museum of Art Instructor; and Ali Sailer, MT-BC; Raquel Farrell-Kirk, MS, ATR-BC.*

the sounds of drums, violins, guitars and singing. Pet therapy dogs and their handlers brought cuddles and comfort to the space as well. The city sent a coffee truck each day with free beverages for all, and restaurants sent food and snacks to ensure everyone was staying fed and hydrated.

Each day, a steady stream of participants filled this space from 10 am to 6 pm, with as many as 50 people attending in any one day. Some of these participants were young children who were likely unaware of the tragedy that led their families to attend this event. Some were students who had been in the very classrooms the shooter had entered, others were the teachers that had protected them or parents who were trying to support them. Many were friends of those that were killed.



Regardless of what brought them to the event, each individual was greeted by an art therapist, offered art materials, and given food, and a space of comfort and support to create. Thanks to support from the American Art Therapy Association and the Florida Art Therapy Association, we received plenty of art supplies. The [Stars for Hope](#) organization provided our first five boxes of stars. The response from all three of these organizations was swift and invaluable in getting this effort off the ground.

Painting the wooden stars from Stars for Hope was so popular that we quickly went through an additional four boxes, completing over one hundred stars in total. These stars were the focus of a special event at the culmination of the week-long Healing through Art event, during which music therapists accompanied us in a procession to the museum's peace garden and played *Hallelujah* while participants installed completed stars throughout the garden where they remain on display. Some participants chose to display their artwork at the school itself or at the scene of other memorials to the shooting victims. In addition to the stars, some participants created their own artwork, completed mandalas, and even wrote poems.



The event was so well received that it has been extended for this week and will provide services as the student return to school. In addition, the museum plans to create an ongoing art therapy group dedicated to continuing to support the Parkland community for the remainder of the academic year.

If you are reading *Art Therapy Today*, you are a supporter of art therapy, and you may be an art therapist yourself. I want you to know that this art therapy community that you belong to did a wonderful job in the face of a horrific event. Those of us in the South Florida art therapy community felt the support sent to us from colleagues, our state chapter, and our national association. That support sustained us in ways both practical and emotional, concrete and intangible.

Art therapists use their unique skills to support those enduring tragedies, crises and upheavals, whether as entire communities or as individual clients. Art therapists are doing this work everywhere, every day, and as I have been reminded during these last two weeks here in South Florida, they are helping people heal.



4875 Eisenhower Ave., Suite 240, Alexandria, VA 22304, [Contact Us](#)