

Voices of Art Therapy: Stories of Art Therapy with Children Who Experienced Trauma near the U.S./Mexico Border

*AATA National Office
February 1, 2018*

Thank you to all who have responded to our call for stories through our *Voices of Art Therapy* outreach. The stories and companion artwork beautifully describe memorable moments in art therapists' careers. In the two narratives below, art therapists share impactful reflections on how children who have experienced trauma can benefit from art therapy. Find the full [Story Library](#) under the "About Art Therapy" tab on our website. **If you have not already done so, [submit your story](#) today!**

"Imagining Before Actualizing" by Scheherazade St. Martin Ph.D. ATR

Art therapy has an amazing breadth of application for all ages and cultures. I discovered this personally first as a student in the Art Therapy Program at Sonoma State University (SSU). I went on to bring art therapy interns from SSU into an elementary classroom setting in the Novato Unified School District [CA], beginning with one pilot program that expanded into eight elementary schools, three middle schools, and two high schools.

Later, I brought art therapy to the University of Guadalajara [Mexico] Department of Health Sciences, working first with children of faculty and eventually establishing an art therapy training program there. It became so popular that the Department of Health and Human Services in the State of Jalisco, through the Secretary of Education, developed and expanded a program through the public schools that eventually reached over six thousand children. This program, in turn, was recognized by the Congress of Mexico through the passage of a law to bring art therapy rehabilitation services to child victims of violence and difficult circumstances in the border states of Mexico.

"Que Te Vaya Bien Mi Nieto" by Melissa Clarke, LMHC, ATR

A few years ago, in 2014, the small, sanctuary city of Chelsea, MA welcomed the wave of unaccompanied minors arriving at our nation's border. This warm embrace was very much needed, as the children who arrived in Massachusetts were in search of reunifying with their families as well as a life in which they could seek safety away from the persecutory, gang violence that has taken over their communities. Not only are these children and families born into a life woven with layers of generational trauma, but they are fleeing their beloved country and culture to make the treacherous journey from either Guatemala, Honduras, or El Salvador with the dream of reaching the U.S. Border. This journey is embedded with atrocity and horrific trauma, and seems to persist when these children reach the large, over-crowded, freezing detention centers, otherwise known as "un carcel"- a jail or "la hieleras"- the icebox.

In order to tell this story and begin to heal from this trauma, a young boy who was 11 at the time of crossing the border, and who is now 14 years old, shared with me, his art therapist through this collaborative art making piece. Together, the two of us crocheted and sewed small granny squares from tethers of fabric ripped and tied together from an old purse taken from the many journeys this art therapist took, and used the bag until it couldn't hold anymore. During the art making process, this boy began to tell this therapist about how cold the detention center was and how he saw a small boy who was scared and trembling. The boy described that, in this moment, he felt that while his situation was frightening, this other boy needed to be sheltered. This client shared how he gave the boy his sweater, but in the moment wished he could cover him in a blanket. As this client spoke, he reminded this therapist about the lack of human dignity in the detention center and being stripped of all of what little things he had left, such as documents, photos, and phone numbers. As a response he created the center of the blanket with a secret zipper pouch to hold his belongings. This final piece shares his story of being sent off to the U.S by his Abuela whom he left behind, yet is covered memories of the bright fabrics to keep him safe and warm.



Now it's your turn to share!

How many times have you been asked, “What is art therapy?” There are many ways to describe art therapy and often a story is a powerful way to share our work. We know these amazing stories because we experience them every day and have the honor of witnessing the impact of art therapy in people's lives. Now it's time to share those stories with the world.

Here are some tips for effective storytelling:

- **Provide focus:** Concentrate on one succinct story to allow readers to really connect with the experience.
- **Be visual:** Compelling images draw readers in. Select artwork that sparks emotion and grabs your attention.
- **Use real details:** Quotes, sights, sounds, and events help make your story more tangible and relatable.
- **Get personal:** Focus your attention on the central figure of your story. Tap into human emotion, enabling readers to form a connection with him/her/them.

Please share [this link](#) with your colleagues— all art therapists are encouraged to participate!

