

The healing power of creativity



SEAN TREMBATH, SASKATOON STARPHOENIX

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Bonnie Chapman, artist and educator, at her home based healing through arts studio in Regina. TROY FLEECE / Regina Leader-Post *TROY FLEECE / REGINA LEADER-POST*

For Bonnie Chapman, art is about much more than the finished product.

For more than 15 years, Chapman has been using creativity to facilitate

healing. From large collaborative pieces to one-on-one sessions with people suffering from all manner of physical and psychological ailments, she uses the process of creation to help people look within themselves and confront their difficulties.

“I think art is a mirror of our life force. If someone is depressed and they make a work of art, it takes their mind off the depression, but they’ve also created this piece of art,” she says from her home studio in Regina.

Chapman spent 10 years with the Saskatchewan Arts Board as an artist in residence in the area of health, a position that didn’t even exist before she proposed it. As an academic, her research showed concrete health benefits to being creative. She has led projects that bring people from very different walks of life together, bonding them through the art making process.

“The arts serve as an innovative vehicle for convening diverse groups of people,” she says.

Chapman was recently recognized for her work when she was awarded the The Jacqui Shumiatcher Arts Award at the Regina YWCA’s 2017 Women of Distinction Awards. She views the honour as a tribute to all those she has worked with along the way.

“I really see it as an award that represents the work I’ve done with people and all the things those many people have taught me. I feel like I stand on their shoulders.”





Bonnie Chapman. (TROY FLEECE/Regina Leader-Post) *TROY FLEECE / REGINA LEADER-POST*

Chapman grew up in Saskatoon and went on to get an education degree from the University of Saskatchewan. During her teaching career, she focused on the arts and special education.

“My focus was always on people who were different. Diversity and disability and creativity,” she says.

She had always been creatively inclined, but her life took a direct turn toward art after she saw a television documentary about Pitchuck Glass School, an international academy located outside Seattle.

“I was just seduced by the glass and how the light played with it,” she says.





After attending Pitchuck, she finished one more year of teaching then struck out as an artist. She lived in Alberta, B.C. and South Korea and worked primarily in glass and paint. Her commissions included glass pieces for Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Edward when the royal couple visited Victoria, B.C., where Chapman lived at the time.

Meanwhile, she was shifting her focus from strictly art to its intersection with health. Her interest in the topic was initially inspired by happenstance. Chapman was in a bookstore in Korea when a book about using art in health care fell off a shelf at her feet. She says this was the jumping off point for the career she continues to this day.

She got her first real look at how art could help people while living in Victoria. Some cancer patients started visiting her studio. Over the course of a few visits it went from the visitors observing to some of them picking up brushes and starting to express themselves.

“I just started to notice how people’s moods shift and change,” Chapman says. “I saw how powerful it was.”

In 2003 Chapman and her husband moved back to Saskatchewan. It was here she went full on into the health field. She approached the Sask Arts Board about a residency in health care, something that hadn’t been done in the province in the past.

“I’ve always liked to break new ground and pioneer new things,” she says.

The residency ended up going on for 10 years, during which she worked on several large collaborative projects, including installations at Regina's Pasqua and General hospitals.



Bonnie Chapman. (TROY FLEECE / Regina Leader-Post) *TROY FLEECE / REGINA LEADER-POST*

Diversity was always one of her focuses. Her collaborations included people of different abilities, orientations and ethnic backgrounds, something she says can break down social barriers through communal effort.

"Artmaking can be a social justice meeting place that facilitates dialogue," Chapman says.

Meanwhile, she was also using her work as research. Chapman enrolled in the University of Regina, pursuing a Master's in education. Her thesis focused on the health benefits of creative expression.

Marc Spooner, a professor in the education department at the U of R, supervised Chapman's thesis. He says Chapman's personality is perfectly suited to helping others through art.

“She’s a magical person. She’s got this really nice, warm, spiritual touch that invites introspection and healing,” Spooner says.

“Her work really poetically braids together certain strands. You have this arts based approach to research and counselling. With it, too, is community engagement.”

Chapman says traditional health care professionals were often amazed at how effective creativity was as a therapeutic method.

“With my Master’s we showed that even an hour of art for a patient can decrease depression, anxiety, stress,” she says.

“Especially for people living with cancer, it can increase their quality of life, their mobility, their pain, tiredness, even nausea.”

Chapman says art allows some patients to visually articulate things that may be hard to put words to. In some cases it can reveal something a patient wasn’t even aware of.

“It’s a way to make the unseen seen. Out of that can come healing and growth,” Chapman says.

While the research and the creations she and her collaborators produced are important, Chapman says the connections she made with the thousands of people she worked with were the most satisfying part of what she has done.

“So many people have taught me that at the heart of our dignity lies our power of creativity. The human being becomes the creator of her or his own self,” she says.





Solstice Sun by Regina artist Bonnie Chapman (Supplied photo)
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When Traci Foster won a YWCA Women of Distinction Award in 2015, she immediately thought of Chapman as someone who deserved a similar honour.

“Her work with our community in Regina was so substantial,” Foster says.

Foster, who has known Chapman since they attended the same art workshop in 2008, was the main nominator for Chapman’s YWCA award.

“She’s one of the kindest human beings I’ve met in my life. By far,” Foster says.

Part of her motivation was a feeling that Chapman's contributions to the community are not as appreciated as they should be, especially in the years since she left her health residency.

"She's not nearly as visible, or talked about, as she was when the work was going on," she says.

Similarly, she wanted to cast light on Chapman's art, particularly her painting, which Foster says is under-appreciated thanks to Chapman being better known for her work in the community.

"She's not nearly as well known as she deserves to be relative to the profound nature of her ability as a visual artist," Foster says.

Chapman says the award was an honour, but downplays her personal accomplishments. She says she has taken as much from those she worked with as they did from her.

"I think I have gained immensely from the literally thousands of people I've connected with in Saskatchewan and other parts of the world," Chapman says.

These relationships and the help Chapman is able to provide to those in need are what drive her to continue the work she does.

"I love creating and I love transforming, but I think my true joy is connecting with people and bringing awareness of self into it."

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