

Art therapy program grows at SIUE

SIUE • Segue



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On this week's episode of Segue, the premier radio show on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound that discusses the ideas and issues on campus at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville and beyond, Greg Budzban, PhD, College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) dean, sits down for an interview with Megan Robb, MA, ATR-BC, LPC, associate professor and graduate program director for SIUE's art therapy counseling program.

They thoroughly discuss Robb's interesting road to SIUE. She earned a master's degree in art therapy from George Washington University (GW) in Washington, D.C. Robb teaches research methodology and research projects, multiculturalism, group art therapy and adult art therapy courses. She has worked in a variety of settings including psychiatric hospitals, special education placements, and mental hospitals, including the National Institute of Health (NIH). Robb's clinical practice and research interests include art-based supervision, shame, cultural competent practice, medical art therapy, and

substance abuse art therapy.

In 2017, Robb and co-investigator Abbe Miller, from Albertus Magnus College, received the American Art Therapy Association's Research Award based on researching the underlying premise of art as a mechanism to sharing inner feelings prior to verbalization.

Through growing up in Minnesota and attending Northeast Missouri State University for Art and Education, Robb realized she liked helping people.

"It started when I was 16-years-old, one of my first jobs was working at a domestic violence center, not a normal first job," Robb says. "I didn't work at fast food or restaurants, it shaped me on a trajectory of knowing that I truly like working with people. I like figuring out with people how to be their best self."

At the NIH, Robb was the only art therapist on staff. While at the NIH Clinical Research Center, Robb explored art therapy in different areas with patients that were there for substance abuse, schizophrenia, depression, and were children and adults with rare and chronic diseases.

"Art therapy is the process of art making to better understand what the issues are for a person, and then hopefully transform them, and change the thoughts that are holding people back," Robb adds. "There is so much happening in our bodies that we cannot control, such as thoughts or feelings. Having a relationship with someone who helps you work on those specific skills is the key to art therapy."

Wanting to balance the chaos of working in different settings, Robb began teaching at GW, where she gained a love for teaching art therapy to students. Upon transferring to SIUE seven years ago, she calls teaching a "mutual learning experience."

Now SIUE's director of art therapy, Robb uses art as a medium to communicate. Budzban inquires how art is utilized as a therapy, as a medium to not only express emotions, but also getting in touch with emotions during tragedy.

“Our memories around tragedy and traumatic experience are not in a cognitive, narrative and sequential fashion in our brain,” Robb says. “You can remember the feel of events and the smells during the traumatic event, and your body remembers these things. Similarly, art materials, such as tactile materials that you’re pushing around like clay on a table or painting with your fingers, you’re remembering the experience. They can help people, with those hyper-alert feelings of tragedy, become aware of these feelings.”

“Art therapy can get people back into their bodies and integrate to help regulate these experiences,” Robb says.

They discuss the SIUE art therapy program and the long history of community involvement within the curriculum.

“Our students donate about 15,000 hours every year in the metro area, where they are working specifically on mental health issues,” Robb says. “They work in schools, community centers, psychiatry facilities, assisted-living centers, homeless shelters and medical hospitals.”

The SIUE art therapy program is currently in the accreditation process, a first for the program. The three-year-old program is competitive and highly selective for prospective students, with approximately 10 admitted each year.

“They do significant research in our community, as well,” Robb says. “We have students working on social justice activist movements, LGBT community and cultural competence programs. We think about our communities’ needs, how our students want to work on their skills and also give back to their communities.”

The community involvement aspect is deeply rooted in the development of therapists in the SIUE art therapy program and results in sending graduates into society ready for employment.

“Our placement rate for students upon graduation is in the 90 percent range within three months, and they often have jobs before they graduate,” Robb says. “We’re the only art therapy program south of Chicago in Illinois, with only 33 programs nationwide.”

Going forward, the art therapy program will continue promoting care in the community. In the Metro East, an opioid epidemic and substance abuse are main issues to be addressed.

“We need to continue to address the needs of the community, substance abuse is a big issue right now,” Robb says. “There are not many art therapy programs out there for adults. We need to meet the needs of the community better, both as clinicians and as a program that produces clinicians to do that.”

Catch the entire conversation between Budzban and Robb by tuning in at 9 a.m. on Sunday, Jan. 21, to WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound.

By Brian Lallish, College of Arts & Sciences Dean’s Office