

Arts & Tackling the Opioid Epidemic

This is the ___ in a series of articles submitted by Allegany College of Maryland (ACM) and its Tackling the Opioid Epidemic: A Community Resilience Approach project partners. This column will focus on building strong people and a stronger, connected community during these difficult times as we deal with addiction, the COVID-19 crisis, and other challenges. Tackling the Opioid Epidemic project is supported by the Maryland Opioid Operational Command Center, and the views presented here are not those of the grantee organization and not necessarily those of the OCCC, its Executive Director, or its staff. This article is submitted by the Allegany Arts Council, one of our community Partners for the grant.

In 2018, the Allegany Arts Council launched a collaboration with Allegany College of Maryland (ACM) and more than 30 local partners that married the issues of art and wellness. The focus of the partnership, the Resilience Project, created a series of events centered around destigmatizing issues of addiction, substance abuse and mental health disorders. The core of the project was an exhibition of artworks depicting individual stories of resilience, and companion events focused on music, poetry and remembrance. The endeavor was hugely successful and led to two important outcomes: the Council's development of a wellness-focused committee, and the addition of a new strategic objective for the organization—the promotion of health and well-being through the arts.

It is no secret in the arts sector that engaging in art-based activities can benefit both physical and mental health. But, fortunately, art as a means of catharsis, communication, connection, and healing has been gaining greater understanding and acceptance. Studies suggest children who are exposed to art and creative expression perform better emotionally and intellectually. The inclusion of art in the treatment of mental health disorders, trauma and PTSD, as well as a means to increase coping mechanisms for day-to-day life, expands our ability to interact with the world around us in a safe and open way.

During the AAC's 2019, "Let Your Sun Shine" program, a collaboration with the Summer Lunch Box Program, Judy Center, and the Center for Mind-Body Medicine, staff and volunteers saw first-hand how important the inclusion of simple expression in our lives can be. The Summer Lunch Box program provides free lunches across the county to underserved children. Our goal was to engage kids as they arrived to pick up lunch and provide a series of fun, lively, engrossing and colorful activities. One activity, "All About Me," asked children to draw a self-portrait with a focus on how they see themselves. When asked to identify what things they most liked about themselves, many children struggled. Some said they had nothing to like at all, but after patience, encouragement and gentle conversation, portraits began to emerge with attributes including "being a great friend," and "having a nice smile."

Other activities led kids through a series of simple yoga poses and breathing exercises. Many children who arrived at the site either lethargic or frenetic, came away with a happier, calmer demeanor after some stretching, breathing, drawing and music. The kids particularly bonded with two puppets, Walter and Sonny, who made weekly appearances, demonstrating that at least for children, talking with pets, real or not, can open the door to sharing and mindfulness.

On the heels of the success of these projects, the Arts Council jumped at the chance to participate in ACM's program, "Tackling the Opioid Epidemic: A Community Resilience Approach." Arts Council Executive Director Julie Westendorff and Program Manager Samantha Kennedy took part in Mind-Body training on the campus of ACM and emerged from the experience eager to incorporate the tools they acquired into the Arts Council's programming.

As it turned out, the strategies they learned became particularly relevant as the COVID-19 pandemic threw everyone's lives into chaos. With routines, support networks, and assumptions about the future in turmoil, the need for stress-relief and mindfulness techniques grew. The Arts Council responded by launching a series of Mindful Moments, led by Samantha Kennedy, who is also a licensed yoga instructor. These short videos have been available to all on the AAC's Facebook page on a weekly basis. The videos—which guide viewers through breathing exercises, guided meditations, and simple yoga poses—have received an enthusiastic response with thousands of views and dozens of shares in just weeks.

Planning for ongoing wellness programs continues. This fall, the Arts Council will host a stress-reduction workshop led by co-facilitators Susan Folk and Samantha Kennedy. A grant-funded initiative through the Allegany College of Maryland, this opportunity will cover topics such as Soft Belly Breathing, Autogenics & Biofeedback, Shaking & Dancing, Guided Imagery, Dialogue with a Symptom, Mindful Eating, and Forgiveness Meditation. The workshop is designed to help anyone incorporate small changes that can make a big impact into their everyday lives.

Free 8-week online Mind-Body-Skills Groups (the core of the CMBM Model of Self-Care and Group Support), facilitated by grant participants, are now available for registration at www.allegany.edu/mind-body-connection These groups provide a great opportunity to connect with others and learn coping skills for the stress we are all facing. For more information or to register, contact Kathy Condor at kcondor@allegany.edu.