FULCRUM

U of O alumnus organizes fundraising art event for mental health

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15th annual mental health event transforms park into art exhibit

Photo: Rosemary Scragg

Strathcona Park will be transformed by the Mental Illness Caregivers Association of Canada (MICA) into an art and artisanal exhibition on Aug. 8, featuring the work of over 70 artisans, from local honey producers to painters.

The event, which is in its 15th year will include a barbeque and a silent auction, with proceeds going towards programs MICA runs for those experiencing mental illness.

Rosemary Scragg, a University of Ottawa alumnus, started the event while volunteering with the Schizophrenia Society of Ontario (SSO) after a close friend committed suicide. The Society was looking for fundraising ideas and, as an artist herself, Scragg came up with the art in the park event.

"I'd helped to organize two other art shows, plus I had participated myself," said Scragg about how she got involved with the event. "I had exhibited in a number of outdoor shows, and so I just jumped (into) the deep end and contacted all of the artists I could think of, and was delighted at their response."
Many of the artists Scragg contacted agreed to do the show because of personal connections to mental health issues. "One of the reasons that they were willing to participate in a brand-new, untried show was that their families had been touched by mental illness too."

After the success of the first year was a success, the Society decided to make it an annual event. Scragg, who is no longer an organizer but still a participant, talked about what she is looking forward to at this years event.

"For me, as a participating artist, an appreciative public, lots of people. It's always fun, it's a beautiful, beautiful venue and every artist that I've spoken to has just loved being there. It's a lovely atmosphere."
Mental illness and art have a longstanding connection.

Art therapy has been around for over 100 years and is used to help with a wide range of mental illnesses, from depression to autism. "Art therapy endorses the idea that the process of making art is inherently therapeutic," according to the Ontario Art Therapy Association's website and can "resolve emotional conflict" and "increase self-awareness and self-esteem."

MICA, recognizing the benefits of art therapy, invites patients to showcase their work at the event free of charge.

On the other hand, the work of many famous artists has been inspired by their mental health issues, from Sylvia Plath to Vincent van Gogh.

MICA started in 2008 to fill a gap in the services available to those with mental illness and their families. The organization took over the Art in Strathcona Park event two years ago when the Society was no longer able to support it.

Madeleine Bertrand, a member of MICA and University of Ottawa alumnus, has a close connection to the cause as her family has been impacted by mental illness, an experience she found difficult due to the lack of services. "MICA's goal is to help caregivers help their loved ones to manage their illness, and improve their quality of life, both for the person who has the illness and their families," wrote Bertrand in an email.

Bertrand herself now runs a Family-to-Family education program for family members of people with mental illness to teach the skills and knowledge needed in order to positively cope with their experiences.

For students experiencing mental illness Bertrand encourages them to reach out to family, doctors, or counsellors. Ask for assistance, be it connecting with mental health service providers, availability of peer support groups, or managing side effects from medications," she wrote.

Art in Strathcona Park will take place on Saturday, Aug. 8 from 10-4 p.m.