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FEATURED

Healing together: Lawrence art exhibit, forums explore trauma, addiction and mental illness

Lawrence art exhibit, forums explore trauma, addiction and mental illness

By Terry Date tdate@eagletribune.com

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CARL RUSSO/Staff photo Lexi Regan, a 2019 graduate of North Andover high school, created this piece of art inspired the Merrimack Valley gas explosions that impacted her family, as well as hundreds of other families. She is attending the Institute of Chicago in the fall.



Baltimore arts activist Peter Bruun has introduced to the Merrimack Valley a campaign to counter despair born of trauma, mental illness and addiction.

He knows two of those things — trauma and addiction — intimately. He lost a child to a heroin overdose.

Bruun, founder of the New Day Campaign, has enlisted local artists, city and community stalwarts and others, leveraging a team approach to working on the problems in Andover, Lawrence and North Andover.

The cornerstone of the initiative is the "Threads Unbroken" exhibit, which is on display at the Lawrence Public Library through Sept. 13.

The exhibit tells stories about overcoming and surviving pain. The project also includes forums and a mural project.

Exhibit paintings and photographs are by Andover, North Andover and Lawrence artists: Lexi Regan, Annie McLoughlin, Jose "Bugzy" Martinez, Vivian McNeeley, Jose Bencosme, and a group of young people involved with the arts and social justice program Elevated Thought.

Regan, a recent North Andover High graduate, is headed to the Chicago Institute of Art in the fall. Her creations, she said, help her process emotions from trauma she experienced while growing up.

Among feelings she navigates in works exhibited in the show are those that arose last fall during the gas explosions that rocked Lawrence, Andover and North Andover.

In some instances, artists from the "Threads Unbroken" show engage with each other.

Jose Bencosme, a videographer and photographer from Lawrence, experienced depression as a result of drugs prescribed for him during childhood. His art has helped him reconnect with his former self, as well as others, he said.

His exhibit photographs include Regan at work on her art at home.

Another artist in the exhibit, McLoughlin, seeks self-understanding through art, exploring internal and external experiences, spaces her lost self lived, she said.

And fellow exhibitor Martinez's works also look at his youth before he got involved with drugs, growing up in the projects in Lawrence in the 1980s. He did prison time — his incarceration related to his drug addiction.

Martinez said Lawrence people have been dying of overdoses, violence and AIDs going back to the 1980s.

Bruun has also enlisted in the art project people from the front lines of helping individuals overcome trauma, mental illness and the opioid epidemic.

The team-approach and the weaving metaphor — threads unbroken — draw on the Valley's history as a textile-making region, and counter divisive reactions steeped in blame and shame, responses that detract from healing, Bruun says.

"But, really, if you look below the surface, you see so much humanity and so much strength and so much possibility to build upon," Bruun says.

"We are all threads ..., by recognizing that and helping one another remain or become threads unbroken can we weave the tapestry we need to weave."

ROOM FOR HEALING

Bruun is no stranger to loss.

He told the story of his family's loss in a letter to the Baltimore Sun newspaper in March of 2016. And two years later, an article in Rolling Stone magazine, "Why heroin addicts are being charged with murder," referenced the tragedy and the ensuing court case.

His daughter Elisif, an artist, died of a heroin overdose Feb. 11, 2014 at the age of 24.

She had been four months clean, and three months into a stay at a North Carolina treatment center, when she contacted a friend who was living on the streets of Philadelphia, addicted to heroin.

Bruun opposed murder charges against the young man — a friend of Elisif's — who sent her the drugs that killed her.

The man was convicted of manslaughter but served a much shorter sentence than he would have if convicted of murder.

Bruun believes that his daughter would still be alive were it not for the stigma and discrimination attached to substance abuse and mental illness.

Fear and judgment drive people underground and lead to death, he said. His work is driven by the opposite, seeking openness and life.

Bruun, an artist and teacher, is the founder of the New Day Campaign, based in Baltimore. Its art programs challenge the stigma tied to mental illness and substance use.

The local exhibit opened in June with a community discussion, and will end in September with a reflection on how to build on the Valley's strengths and the role young people have in that mission.

The June 13 opening drew more than 100 people to the library's conference room.

Speakers included people who have experienced loss, mental illness or addiction.

Among them was Red Rose Grace — a spoken-word artist who has devoted herself to arts and healing since experiencing the loss of a loved one to opioids.

Sandy Guerrier, homeless initiative coordinator for the city of Lawrence, talked about the dual problems many homeless shoulder — addiction and mental illness.

Andover Youth Services Director Bill Fahey and Canal Street Gym's boxing director Jose "Bugzy" Martinez talked about their work with youth.

Lesly Melendez, deputy director of Groundworks Lawrence, talked about healing.

"I have my own losses from the opioid epidemic, and working on Threads Unbroken has allowed me to grieve and grow," she said. "It's important for our community where so many of us are hurting."

SEEKING A WHOLE

Melendez belongs to the Threads Unbroken host committee, which invited Bruun to the Merrimack Valley.

Leigh Perkins, a teacher at the private Brooks School in North Andover, is a friend of Bruun's and knew of his work in Maryland.

She recognized the arts-based project's value for the Merrimack Valley — a place where communities are often isolated and many people have been touched by trauma, mental health challenges and substance use.

"It's so ironic that we feel such isolation because just about everyone has been touched, and we really ought to be together on this as a community," she says.

"That's what we hope a project like Threads Unbroken can do — use the power of art, stories, and sharing to weave ourselves together into a more cohesive whole over this hard set of challenges.

The opioid crisis challenge remains, as indicated by state statistics.

Deaths from overdoses in Massachusetts have remained at around 2,000 people a year from 2016-18, even though Naloxone, which can reverse the effects of an overdose, has been more readily available in recent times.

According to the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, confirmed opioid-related overdose deaths were 2,030 in 2016, 1,966 in 2017 and 1,976 in 2018.

In those same years, 149 people died from confirmed opioid overdose deaths in Andover (seven), North Andover (eight) and Lawrence (134).

The state public health department estimated 182 deaths from overdoses in March 2019 (the latest statistic available) in Massachusetts. That compares to 164 confirmed deaths in March 2018.

Threads Unbroken will end Thursday, Sept. 12, with a forum and closing reception. The forum will reflect on cohesiveness and roles young people can play in building cohesiveness.

The library exhibit is on the second floor, outside the circular wall encasing the staircase.

This is the library's second-year anniversary showcasing local art.

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

What: "Threads Unbroken," art exhibit devoted to healing

When: Through Sept. 13

Where: Lawrence Public Library, 51 Lawrence St.

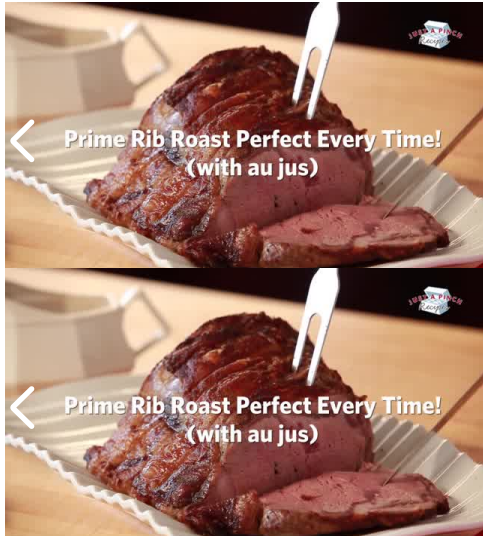
How much: Free

Information: 978-620-3600, lawrencefreelibrary.org



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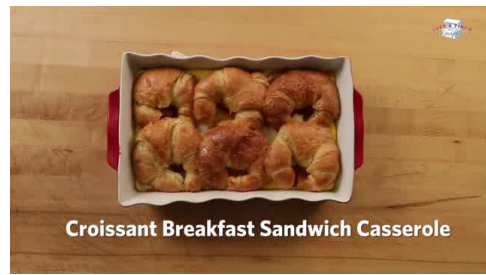
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