

**ATACO recognizes Tisha Adams, Ed, LPC, A.T.R.-BC  
Doctor of Counseling, Education, and Supervision for the Art Therapist Spotlight!**



*It was an honor to interview a former supervisor of mine and an influential mentor for myself and many others in the Art Therapy field. Tisha is an Art Therapist and Senior Behavioral Health Clinician in the Ponzio Creative Art's Therapy Department at Children's Hospital Colorado. Tisha's authenticity, kind nature, and talent make her an incredible art therapist, counselor, educator, and person. Tisha and I spent some time over lunch to catch up about the art therapy field, life, and work.*

**Can you tell us what drew you to the field of art therapy?**

As a young adult I was drawn to working with children and to the arts in more of a recreational capacity. As an undergraduate in college I was studying psychology and worked summers in Maine where I taught and managed land sports, was a bunk counselor. Post-graduation I began working at the Cleo Wallace Center in Denver, CO, a facility for the treatment of psychiatric, emotional, and behavioral problems in children and adolescents ages 12-21. My title at the time was mental health worker and I engaged the clients in many different capacities to enhance their social and emotional development; including arts based activities. One of my favorite parts of the job was leading an art based group. At one point when I was running an art group someone mentioned to me that I was doing "art therapy" a term that I hadn't heard before. I decided to do more research and I contacted Mary Cane Robinson, who at the time was the outgoing President of ATAC. In a written letter, she recommended that I contact Robin Gabriels, who was the incoming President of ATAC (around 1989). After talking to Robin, I knew that I wanted to earn my Graduate Art Therapy in the beautiful state of Vermont at Vermont College in Montpelier. I was able to complete my internship with Robin Gabriels as my on-site supervisor at National Jewish Health and my off-site supervisor was Dottie Oatman. When I look back, many of the founding leaders of ATAC (Art Therapy Association of Colorado) and my many teachers have had significant influence on my art therapy work. I am fortunate to say that early on I was trained or exposed to so many art therapists regarded as leaders in the field; Janie Ryan, Linda Gantt, Gladys Agell, Eleanor Ulman, Paula Howie, and Mimi Farrelly-Hanson to name a few.



Mary Can Robinson Welcome to ATAC letter to Tisha 1989.PDF

### **What do you think is the power of Art therapy?**

Anyone who is an artist understands the power of art. Speaking to my experience in the medical art therapy field working with children and adolescents who are living with severe and chronic physical and mental health issues, I think art therapy offers much power in its inherent process of providing opportunities of choice, control, and connection. The transformative power that the art process holds is powerful. The power is evident to me when I experience a child or adolescent who might present as sad and hesitant before therapy and become focused, engaged, and happy during and after therapy. I love that the impact of art therapy can be overt or held within the patient's imagery for gaining insight overtime.

### **In addition to your academic and professional career in art therapy, you are also an educator. What parts of your journey have been most satisfying?**

It is funny how things unfold in our lives. I don't ever remember not feeling satisfied with what I was doing. I always felt like my art therapy career has been organic as it has been unfolding in front of me; during the process I have been present for opportunities in my life, my work, and my education. My introduction into the field happened naturally I did not do extensive research or questioning. I often say that I have tripped and fallen into many of the things I have had the privilege of doing. Although I have some awareness that I have been open to taking risks and taking advantage of opportunities that have come my way. For example, after graduate school while working with kids with medical issues I realized that I could use art to help kids develop fun and creative visual tools that worked to organize their complex medication and self-care needs. I wanted to learn more about using creative computer programs to develop visual tools. I marched down to Art Institute of Colorado (AiC) and enrolled. I learned a lot and earned an Associate's degree in Graphic Design. After graduating from AiC I noticed they had a part time Gen Ed instructor position posted. I applied and was hired. I taught Psychology and Creative Thinking for 13 years to students who were working toward Bachelor degrees in creative careers like culinary, photography, graphic design, interior design, web design, and video production. I loved being around college students and I found my training as an art therapist was helpful in the classroom and I became excited about integrating creative teaching models, activities, and assignments into coursework to help the students discover the value of psychology and mental health. I really enjoyed the balance of teaching and providing therapy at Children's Hospital. My confidence as an educator grew and as an adjunct instructor at AiC was eligible for tuition assistance in obtaining a Doctorate...I decided to go back to school. Low and behold, I completed a Doctoral degree in Counseling, Education, and Supervision in 2014.

### **Do you have a favorite art piece that you have done? Are you working on anything now that you are really excited about?**

The children I have worked with over the years have inspired and influenced my own artwork. Most often, I hand build with clay. Two of my favorite pieces that were patient influenced included a clay sculpture created in memory of a patient who passed away from cardiomyopathy and the other clay sculpture created after discharging a young, creative, and inspiring patient diagnosed with ADHD after 2 years of therapy. A lot of my work tends to reflect humor and whimsy. I have begun to collect found wood, metal objects, and tin containers with the plan to assemble to create whimsical, metal animal sculptures. I will have to wait and see what develops.

### **Are there any particular mediums that or materials that you use the most?**

I use clay often in my individual work with patients at the hospital, I love that clay requires commitment and patience. Pediatric patients seem to be drawn to clay. I find that it has a calming effect and scaffolds the building of trust and rapport. Personally, I love clay because it is forgiving and sensory.

### **How would you like to see the field or profession evolve in the coming years?**

Even though it seems a lot of us are not trained nor have interest in conducting research. Despite the clinical skills art therapists have, I think they are too often viewed as "milieu staff", "adjunct therapy", or "art teachers". In my own setting, I am experiencing more pressure to work more evidence based. For this reason, I need to translate my work into evidence-based terms for other mental health professionals. I would like to see that art therapists are trusted and valued for their knowledge, expertise, and skills in all hospitals and clinical settings and considered as integral to patient treatment. Title protection would be nice as a way to formally distinguish, support, and substantiate our field.

### **What advice do you have for prospective students and new professionals?**

For undergraduate students I would suggest they take both art classes and psychology classes; they should consider psychology training as important part of their early training. For those who have already graduated with a bachelor's degree; I would suggest getting experience in the mental health field working with populations you are drawn to ...but also do not limit yourself; take opportunities as they arise. For graduate level students I would suggest, reading professional articles as much as you can, take advantage of opportunities to ask questions, and continue to do your own art for fun and to help cope with life stressors. It's always good to try to attend workshops and presentations about mental illness and treatment methods inside and outside the field of art therapy and during practicum and internship, be open to a variety of experiences and interview a variety of professionals working in the field in a variety of different settings. As new and seasoned professionals I would suggest for individuals to stay connected to other creative arts therapists, advocate for art therapy, seek great supervision, and work toward obtaining your ATR and LPC right away.

### **What or who has been the most influential in your career?**

I don't think I can name just one person. There have been so many in the past and currently. ATAC and the founders of that organization in the early 1990's, my Graduate level teachers and peers, and my supervisors and art therapy mentors. I am always humbled and moved by anyone who works every day to help, are willing to be helped, or are advocates for helping. They are dedicated and passionate people and we all benefit from each other.

### **Who is your favorite artist?**

I don't have a favorite artist. I guess my favorite artist happens in moments. If I love the art, I love the artist.

### **You are involved with the ATACO as a professional organization. How important is it to collaborate with your art therapy colleagues? How have your professional collaborations benefitted your career?**

I had served on the ATAC board later ATACO as president, vice president, as well as ethics chair and I had involvement in the organization for over 15 years. Since I have been at Children's hospital and a part of an interdisciplinary team in the Ponzio Creative Art's therapy Program working with music therapists, a dance movement, and yoga therapist I have the opportunity to connect daily with other creative arts therapists. I realize that this is a less common experience for most and for many years this was not the case for myself when I was a solo art therapist at National Jewish Health. It was during this time that ATAC gave me a sense of community, opportunity for professional development, experience, a sense of comradery, and a chance to connect with those who helped pioneer the field of art therapy in the state of Colorado in addition to supporting those who were coming into the field.

### **Is there anything you would like to see happen through ATACO in supporting and expanding the local art therapy field.**

First, before I comment; thank you for all that you and the board do for the field of art therapy in the state of Colorado. I know that it is very time involved and can be a labor of love. I love that Naropa University students and faculty are so involved in ATACO. I think holding more social/professional events in the community of Denver as we did in the past days of ATAC might be a good way to draw in the Colorado art therapy community. We had some success in the past with holding these kind of events and collaborating with other creative art therapy disciplines. A favorite memory of mine is ATAC organized a silent auction to honor our past and founding board members... it was such a great event and really well received!

### **Please tell us about your self-care strategies or philosophy**

I believe self-care is a choice. Let me just say I feel I am making better choices in regards to self-care as I age. I have discovered that I need to have balance in my life; professional, family, physical, personal, and social and seek opportunities as often as I can. One of the things that I have done for the past 3-4 years is to host 3-4 art nights a year with friends at my home for social connection and creativity

### **If there is anything more, you would like to tell us about yourself or about your experience as an art therapist?**

Thank you for your interest in me and my work. And thanks for all you are doing for ATACO.

**Interviewed by Shauna Perry, MA, LPC, ATR, ATACO Vice President**

*The ATACO Art Therapist Spotlight aims to recognize exceptional creative and professional work by ATACO members who go above and beyond in the communities in which they work and live. If you would like to nominate an art therapist for his or her extraordinary contributions to the field, or highlight your own contributions, please email nominations to: email address: Shaunaperry29@gmail.com*

