



Art Therapist Spotlight Interview: Amy K. Leiter

Amy K. Leiter, LPC, ATR-BC is a practicing art therapist in Colorado. She is a Founding Partner of Violet hive Art Collections, Art Therapist, and Art as Healing Facilitator. Ms. Leiter currently works with women in transition and through that work a lot of spiritual emergencies surface. The work builds around ideas of core values and fulfillment. Through founding Violet Hive Art Collections, Ms. Leiter was able to work with different organizations including schools building connections with the community she sought for. Below is an interview with Ms. Leiter on her personal commitment to art therapy.

Interview

What originally drew you to the field of art therapy?

“I did graphic design for a decade. Through that work, I found something was missing. I originally wanted more connection with people and I hoped that whatever work I was doing would be personally fulfilling and would have an impact on the community.” Ms. Leiter was drawn to the field of art therapy from looking at what was missing from the experience she was moving through in her career. She began to take a look at what her core values were. This practice prompted her to recognize that connecting with people was the first step she was looking for. As she looked at different careers and applied different abilities there was a time she went into therapy. Her therapist at the time asked Amy if she knew about art therapy as it seemed to sync up with her core beliefs. Ms. Leiter discovered “when big levels of healing or growth happen, everything changes.”

Can you talk about the power of art therapy in your life and your work?

“I always knew that art was helpful for me, it’s always been a part of my life even from when I was little. As I discovered art therapy, I realized I was doing a lot of my own growth and healing. The power of art therapy is really surrounding.” Ms. Leiter specified that someone who is trained in art therapy who can guide a person through an art process and be able to reflect back what they are seeing through the narrative of art can be powerful. Within art therapy you have a relationship to help process.

“Through the artwork with a lot of my clients, you can see a tangible result of the growth and the healing process the client is going through.” Ms. Leiter described a bit of her own process working with clients, “I start with using the bridge drawing and the DDS in the first couple session then graduate to creating goals from those art pieces then work towards long-term projects.” With every client she works with she takes the time to go back and review the artwork after approximately six sessions. By doing this “they [clients] are able to tangibly see how their art has changed to show more expression. They are able to see the progress that is happening in relation to how they are feeling.” Ms. Leiter describes art as a physical, tangible way of seeing change. People’s defenses are so different in talk therapy in comparison to art therapy. “There is a level of subconscious coming up to communicate with you in the artwork. When it comes out in the art it is easier to accept and acknowledge.”

Do you see transpersonal elements manifest in your professional work?

Ms. Leiter discussed in the journey to reach the career field of art therapy, Ms. Leiter discovered that spirituality was something she needed for her own healing process. “Generally, talk therapy wasn’t really addressing everything,” she needed spiritual elements to become a part of her own healing. Through her own process of growth, the spiritual realm was an essential component and that really helped her in her own healing work. This inspired her to apply the elements to her professional work.

Ms. Leiter described that transpersonal elements naturally became a part of her client-centered and strengths-based lens. The spiritual inclusion expanded her practice, providing more room to encompass further healing.

Can you tell us about the journey to Naropa?

Multiple scenarios surfaced for Ms. Leiter as she found her way to Naropa University in Boulder, CO. She had her own home and settled herself in Colorado. Ms. Leiter felt it was not the best for her to move out of state to pursue art therapy education when she came across Naropa, the only art therapy school in Colorado. She knew she “was not feeling fulfilled in therapy,” especially just talk therapy. As she found Naropa she noticed more connection with the spiritual realm and was called to the transpersonal component at Naropa. The university incorporated mindfulness and meditation practices that did not fully become a part of Ms. Leiter’s practice until later, “Mindfulness and meditation weren’t much of my own process as it has been post-grad.”

As she walked through her new path, Ms. Leiter shared, “I think a lot of my life, I suppressed my intuition...I was kind of the one who always went against what everyone was doing, unintentionally, but it prepared me to do the work I am now doing.” Ms. Leiter believes that self-judgment is a message from the body or a higher self that says changes need to be made. Through the work, she helps clients work with their intuition and encouraging them to trust themselves through “knowing that you have more of the answers than you think you do.”

From your point of view, what is the most important thing to keep in mind when working as an art therapist?

“When I was at Naropa, one of the things that always stuck to me, being able to sit and hold space as a human being in the room with someone. What separates us from other types of therapists is that we are willing to be creative and flexible.” Ms. Leiter expressed that it does not matter the setting, what matters is “how we present the materials, hold the space, and the rest is kind of trusting the process.” One of the most important pieces to keep in mind could be just small reminders \ of the kind of therapist she strives to be. Ms. Leiter shared, “being able to show up, be creative, and flexible is what holds and creates the space for healing to happen.”

What are some important self-care practices you recommend or practice?

“For me, probably 85% of the artwork, either us as practitioners, interns, or clients...most of the work being done is process art.” In relation to self-care, there is an understanding that a person does not have to stay in a long term process. “Art and mindfulness can work to your advantage. You can show up, have an art experience with minimal elements.” Ms. Leiter provided an example of how a lot of clients can do simple

processes or more complex processes through materials like weaving, embroidery, or watercolor. “The idea that you don’t need a lot to have self-care” because the art can be used simultaneously as a healing and self-care practice.

Are you working on anything now that you’re really excited about?

“Yes, we’re expanding! We’re developing an art as therapy team, so we will be working with artists and therapists.” Through the process Ms. Leiter is working with interns from various universities, working in the community, and with programming at the studio. She is currently in the process of looking for a new studio space for a team of artists and art therapists to come together to provide movement and different modalities.

Ms. Leiter and her business partner are moving into Nurture which is a wellness collective in Fall where fifty (50) different wellness practitioners work in the same space. As part of the new expansion, Ms. Leiter and her business partner are also bringing in interns to start a reduced fee program, “The internship program helps out the community by spreading the message of art therapy to bring the community together, push the message of art for healing.”

How important is it to collaborate with your art therapy colleagues?

For Ms. Leiter’s work and mission statement of building connection she feels it is really important to collaborate with art therapy colleagues. Ms. Leiter believes that collaborations open practitioners up to learning from each other. “I want to always be learning, being open to learning even from my interns. Learning should always be seen as a two way street.” It opens up opportunities for the community to connect in different ways. Ms. Leiter shared that there are times when she will be working a case, trying to figure something out and she will obtain new ideas from watching and collaborating with colleagues who are in their own process of working. Learning and collaborating is a core value Ms. Leiter keeps alive by starting an art as healing team as a way to collaborate with other practitioners.

How have your professional collaborations benefited your career?

“A lot of us have had different life experiences, post grad experiences, and education experiences,” Ms. Leiter responded. “There is an area someone is passionate about and brings it to the clients...which brings in new ideas and creativity to avoid burnout [and] to avoid feeling a lack of fulfillment.” As part of her line of work, she does a lot of team

building groups in activities as she recognizes the importance of connecting with others to build support. Ms. Leiter discussed how therapists in private practice tend to feel isolated. “When you leave your cohort after school, you may be the only art therapist working at a facility or go into private practice” which can stifle connection with other art therapists. “Connecting with the community and other therapists can provide a space of exploration, healing and support to the art therapy community and surrounding areas.” Ms. Leiter makes it a priority in her work to share the importance of connection as well as the awareness of how connection is impacting people.

How would you like to see the field of art therapy evolve in the coming years?

“The biggest thing for me is that there needs to be a push for licensure in every state. The field is changing and sometimes it takes you away from being able to work as a practitioner for art therapy because you are having to serve two different things at once.” Ms. Leiter described how currently art therapists in Denver are becoming more eclectic by adding different aspects to their work and practices as a way to legitimize the work. For example, “connecting to the body is becoming more prevalent.” Ms. Leiter further discussed how art therapists would be able to work with more ease having art therapy licensure. “It can change legislation of how insurance panels work in terms of recognizing art therapy and legitimizing it more.”

Is there anything you would like to see happen to support and expand the Colorado art therapy community?

In the art therapy community, Ms. Leiter would like to see more of a pulling together with the community and being able to meet the community in existing events. Ms. Leiter hopes to have more people understand how accessible art is. “There are so many people in the community who focus on not being good at art when there are so many different ways to look at different crafting and art practices that have been used in the past that can be used for healing.” Ms. Leiter discussed how using sewing, embroidery, water coloring on fabric are some examples to break traditional ideas and standards of who can make art. Ms. Leiter hopes to send that message that “even though it is therapy, you can be having fun and gaining new experiences that maybe, creative wise, have been cut off since middle school.” Ms. Leiter would like to see the art therapy community help change the traditional idea of who can make art especially since it can be beneficial. “There’s a lot of confidence and creativity that is being awakened,” through the art process. “Using the right side of your brain can help [a person] make new decisions

[because] you are open to more things than you thought possible” when you are a part of the art world.

Is there anything additional you would like to share about yourself or your experience as an art therapist?

Ms. Leiter shared that she strongly believes there has not been a time where she has been happier in her work. “Really being able to connect with a classroom,” provides her a daily validation that leaving her old career was worth it. “Even the idea of my adult clients, getting to witness, honor and be part of someone’s story, process and healing. There is nothing else that makes me happier.” Ms. Leiter stated she has been able to learn to trust herself again and take what is coming up for her to use it to guide her life. She enjoys being able to help others do the same, which brings her validation in the journey she is taking and fulfilling joy.