

Empezarte Brings a Rare Commodity to City's Marginalized Youth: Art Therapy

By Philip Heckel

For psychologist Gabriela Osorio, the healing arts are literally that—art.

Six months ago, Osorio and ARTES Open Studio director, Oscar Aguirre, launched a non-profit art therapy pilot program in town called Empezarte, collaborating with the Foundation for Child Support (FAI) of San Miguel with the hope of giving youth marginalized by an economically changing city.

"We both saw a great need for this type of program," said Osorio.

Since then, six teenagers between the ages of 14 and 16 have met Saturdays at the Artes studio.

Osorio's gracious manner reveals little about her professional acuity and over twenty years' experience as a psychologist with a private, clinical practice. She holds a BS in psychology from ITESO, Guadalajara, and two master's

degrees, one in family therapy from Zamora, Michoacán and another in clinical art therapy from Loyola Marymount, Los Angeles. She also studied art in Vancouver at the Emily Carr Institute.

Among other techniques, Osorio uses painting, mask-making, and various types of creative construction as a therapeutic method.

"I always believed psychology was somehow connected with art," explains Osorio. "I read artists' biographies while studying and was fascinated to understand art through personal stories. I first encountered art therapy through a workshop in Vancouver and knew it was something I would do for the rest of my life."

San Miguel de Allende is a small town with a big-city feel, including its share of big-city problems. Upmarket developments have marginalized many residents and have put teenagers at risk, she says. She sees a con-

nection to the violent crime on the rise in San Miguel.

"There's no comprehensive mental health support system, almost no mental health services at all," adds Aguirre.

"Empezarte provides a safe space where teens feel free to talk about problems and express themselves creatively," says Osorio. "They're not alone. They can be themselves, talk about things they usually can't. We use art as a creative therapeutic approach to work on personal challenges, mental illness—life's difficulties. Art therapy has unique qualities that facilitate the process and improve mental state."

"It's been an amazing group," she adds. "At first, most were shy, closed. But once we began to make art, it was easier to talk about things. One young man was painfully shy, couldn't make eye contact, said he didn't like art and was bad at it. Eventually, he



Art therapist Gabriela Osorio

gained confidence and was the first to say what he wanted to do with the group mural. They were punctual, stayed engaged, and talked openly about problems. And they listened to each other."

Now that the pilot program is ending, says Osorio, "The kids are concerned they won't have a safe space where they can express themselves. We have a final project and evaluation, then hopefully will continue with Empezarte full-time."

There is an ongoing fund drive with tax-deductible contributions underway. What's really needed is a patron angel or significant grant to establish Empezarte as a full-time program, Osorio and Aguirre say. For more information, contact: www.artessma.com/empezarte-kids-art-therapy

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