

## The Healing Power of Art

**O**ut of a lump of clay, David creates a bird and nest. To the untrained eye, it is simply a beautiful work of art. For David, it is much more.

“This bird person is very much about David,” explains **Elsa Pelier, ATR-BC, LCAT**, Supervisor and Primary Therapist at the Ittleson Center. “Through art, David was able to exhibit strengths that had not been evident. His need to individuate is eloquently expressed through the bird and nest. He is able to do this because of the presence of the art therapist who nurtures and supports his efforts.”

For children whose lives have been marked by neglect and abuse and severe trauma, this sense of safety is key. The boundaries of paper or formed image allows the child to gain some sense of control as they work through feelings and experiences, indirectly and thus safely through the metaphor of art.

At Ittleson, 70 seriously emotionally disturbed children between the ages of 6 and 13 are served through a network of residential and day treatment programs and a community residence in the Bronx. Children benefit from comprehensive clinical and education services. Art therapy has come to play a very critical role in the Ittleson treatment program.

Explains **Elizabeth Osborn, Ph.D.**, Director of the Ittleson Center, “Art therapy has proven to be an important means of self-expression for our fragile children who are often less verbal and less accessible to traditional modes of therapy.”



Elsa Pelier at Ittleson art show



David's artwork "The Bird of Life"

At present, Ittleson offers individual art therapy sessions for 20 of the 32 children who live at the Riverdale facility. A cornerstone of the program is the placement of art therapy interns who are active members of the treatment team. These masters level students, from area universities including NYU, Pratt Institute, and Hofstra University, are supervised by Elsa, a board certified and New York State licensed art therapist.

The long-term goal of the Ittleson program is to see every residential client in art therapy

as an integral part of their ongoing treatment. Art therapy would also benefit day treatment and community residence clients.

Creative arts therapies are an important component of a number of JBFCS programs, most significantly the Westchester Campus' ARTISTS program sponsored by Joyce Cowin. As at Ittleson, art helps youngsters there overcome traumatic experiences and find opportunities for productive expression of their feelings.

*Elsa's explanation says it best, "Art making invites creativity – expressing oneself in a way that searches, soothes and masters feelings that may be too painful to put into words". It is a treatment approach that holds great potential for emotional healing, as evidenced throughout many JBFCS programs.*