

Art saves lives at local community studio

By Tamara Newell

tamara@newnan.com

On the edge of downtown Newnan sits one of the most colorful and welcoming places in Coweta County. Open the door to Backstreet Community Arts and enter a haven of creativity.

Founder and Executive Director Kim Ramey opened her doors six years ago and has kept the studio free to the public for ages 18 and up. Weekly classes include writing, ukulele, drawing, painting, knitting, sewing and felting and are open to beginners and experienced artists alike.

Backstreet Arts actively reaches out to adults who may not be aware of or have access to the proven healing power of art: those who have experienced trauma, illness or grief; veterans; and homeless and limited-income individuals.

“Backstreet Community Arts exists to provide a safe, welcoming, creative environment to anyone who may benefit from the healing power of art and community,” said Ramey. “We believe art can save your life.”

Art saves lives

In 2016, Mike Stillman’s battle with military PTSD pressed in on him from all sides.

“I was actively researching foolproof methods to end myself,” said Stillman. “After a suicide attempt in December of 2016, Kim Ramey talked me into coming to Backstreet Community Arts. It was transforming, and it literally saved my life.”

“I met (Mike) when I was building this place out,” said Ramey. “When he first came in, he would sit and face the door.”

According to Ramey, hesitation is common for first-timers. “We’ve had people sit in the parking lot and look at the door and then come back another day,” she said.

The power of art in Stillman’s life now pours into others who walk through the studio doors. Today, he teaches ukulele classes and runs the leather department.

“When my PTSD starts going haywire, if I have a ukulele near, problem solved. My Uke has been a part of my PTSD therapy for years... and yes, ukuleles are art as well,” said Stillman.

May is Mental Health Awareness Month

Post-pandemic life increased the conversation around mental health and what can be done to individually and collectively improve it. Mental Health Awareness Month highlights the importance of mental health, from self-care to actively treating severe conditions.

According to the American Psychological Association, 84 percent of psychologists who treat clients with anxiety and 74 percent who treat depression have increased in both conditions since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional cited conditions that have statistically increased include sleep-wake disorders, obsessive-compulsive-related disorders, and substance-related and addictive disorders. Moreover, a systematic review from the Journal of the American Medical Association concluded that those with mental illness had a higher mortality rate from COVID-19.

“People who go through grief and participate in art can express themselves when often times words don’t work. There aren’t words to express what we go through, there aren’t words for sorrow that we’re feeling. I don’t know that there are words created that can say that. But by using color or shapes, sometimes it may not make sense to the world, but we can get that out and process it,” said Ramey.

Studies on the effects of art on mental health confirm what people often know instinctively. For example, a 2022 study from the Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts researched people who participated in the arts from 2020-21 and found evidence of decreased anxiety levels.

“It’s hard to describe how art affects me. Whenever I paint, I take a toxic part from my heart and put it on canvas. If I paint a house, I imagine that one of the things that triggers me was a person who lives in that house. They have moved out of my heart and I know where they are. I guess the best way to put it is that I use art to unpack my heart,” said Stillman.

Lori Whitney is the mother of a disabled adult, Sarah, who regularly attends Backstreet Arts.

“My daughter, Sarah, was part of the drum circle meeting weekly as part of Backstreet Arts. Kim Ramey and the whole group were very accepting of her,” said Whitney. “Sarah struggles with some anger and anxiety issues, and the drum circle would help her in these areas, lifting her mood often for several days afterward. The group made her feel safe and cared for and the music seemed to penetrate some of her darker places.”

Art for everyone

“You don’t have to hit a dark place,” said Ramey on bringing art into your daily life. “It’s just hugely important to everyone to just keep our sense of well-being.”

While the power of arts can bring light into dark times, Ramey believes simple daily enjoyment is just as profound.

“We all have something that art can help us with. Decision-making or just maintenance on our mental health,” said Ramey. “Or learning a new skill and the sense of accomplishment. All of that is in the whole umbrella of mental health.”

Backstreet Arts is a free community arts studio. To book a spot in a class or open art session, visit <https://www.backstreetart.org/>. Backstreet is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit.