

The Art Group



Connections

child, youth and family services

*Edited by Yoshi Bandara and Hoi Shan Sandy Chu
Foreword from Joanne Donne, Counsellor with the Family
Violence Counselling Service, and Anne Riggs, Art Group
Facilitator.*

There is hope.

As second year undergraduate medical students at Monash University, we were placed with the Connections UnitingCare Family Violence Counselling Program as part of our Community Based Practice (CBP) Program. Every Tuesday, we spent the day at the Prahran office learning about the organisation and participating in the Connections Art Group.

The Art Group really was a highlight for us, not just of our year-long placement but of each week we had the privilege to be a part of it. Throughout the course of the year, we met and got to know Anne, Joanne and the amazing group of women who undertook the class, as well as participate in the creative process ourselves and produce artwork of our own.

The class itself was a fantastic opportunity for us to take a break from our academic studies and to be completely absorbed in a task that was creative, communal and completely engaging. It was a quiet and rare form of stress relief in the midst of our lectures and classes every week, and we looked forward to the opportunity to work on our mosaics each class.

The real value of the group for us, though, was the chance to meet such an incredible group of women and to work alongside them each week. To witness their work and see the strength and beauty reflected in their creations was truly inspiring. Discussing the experience of the Art Group, both with women we'd met within the class and those who had participated in past art groups, and gathering their quotes for this anthology gave us a unique and profoundly moving glimpse of the extraordinary paths they've walked. From their enthusiastic testimonies of how much the Art Group really meant to these women, to the poignant recollections of their empowerment, how it formed part of the considerable change and growth they had undergone, we will never forget these women or the stories we had the honour of hearing and recording.

It's been an absolute pleasure working with Anne, Joanne, our Field Educator Bask, and the rest of the Connections staff. We sincerely appreciate all they, as well as the coordinators of this Placement at Monash, Nicky Peters, Leigh Segal and our Academic Advisor Christopher Fox, have done for us, and we look forward to working with Connections again in the future.

Isuree (Yoshi) Bandara and Hoi Shan (Sandy) Chu

It is wonderful to see this book of art coming to life! As I have looked through the pages, I am reminded of so many enjoyable, creative times spent with women here at Connections.

The Art Groups began in 2009 as a proposal to offer art to women who had been through trauma, to assist them in their recovery. With a leap of faith, Connections accepted the idea; the classes began and with that, many creative, social and emotional journeys also began, or took a new turn.

The Art Groups are a special part of all our weeks. My role is to offer my skills as an artist to the group, as well as offer creative ideas for consideration. At first these are simple techniques and themes to get women creating, feeling confident and comfortable. The mosaic mirrors and coil pots are examples of these first steps.

Gradually women are introduced to themes that I hope will develop new skills and a new outlook. Themes around the self, the past, baggage, the body and the future help participants look at themselves and their lives with different eyes. Joanne brings her considerable therapeutic skills to the group, offering insight and providing support where required. The magical thing about these groups is the sense of community that grows and holds women safely as each tried out new creative practices as well as using these to express something of her inner life.

In some ways I am amazed by the work that emerges from under the fingertips of the women, and in other ways, I am not. I know each of use has great potential to be creative. I also know that each participant has great potential to step out from the shadow of their unhappy past to create a sense of wellbeing for herself and others.

I hope you enjoy the book.

Anne Riggs
PhD Artist
Art Group Facilitator

The Connections Art Group is a special space for women to create. The artwork is a reflection of the courage, hope, hurt and resilience that has been a part of their lives.

It provides a space for women to reflect upon emotions, both joyful and painful; to explore the process of using mediums such as mosaic and clay; and to create a piece of work which is meaningful to them. The beauty and strength of each piece has been made with much care and courage.

The pieces in this book are also a result of perseverance: to keep on going when the clay does not seem to do what the artist wants; to persist when thoughts of past pain and hurt intrude into the process; and to maintain attendance each week when some days feel just too hard to do anything.

It has been a pleasure and privilege to have been part of this journey over the past 3 years. A big thank you to all of the extraordinary women who contributed to this project.

I hope you enjoy these beautiful images and words.

Joanne Donne
Counsellor
Family Violence Counselling Program

This is an anthology of the artwork produced by the Connections Art Group and the experiences of participants over its years of activity.

Launched in 2009, the Connections Art Group is run by the Connections UnitingCare Family Violence Counselling Service for survivors of family violence. Utilizing Art Therapy primarily in the form of clay and mosaic, this Group was established to contribute to the wellbeing of women who have experienced, or are experiencing, violence and trauma. The Group provides an opportunity to socialize and participate in art creation with others who share similar experiences. As well as developing new skills, the Art Group provides an important sense of community and safety that facilitates the discovery of the beauty and pleasure of the creative process.

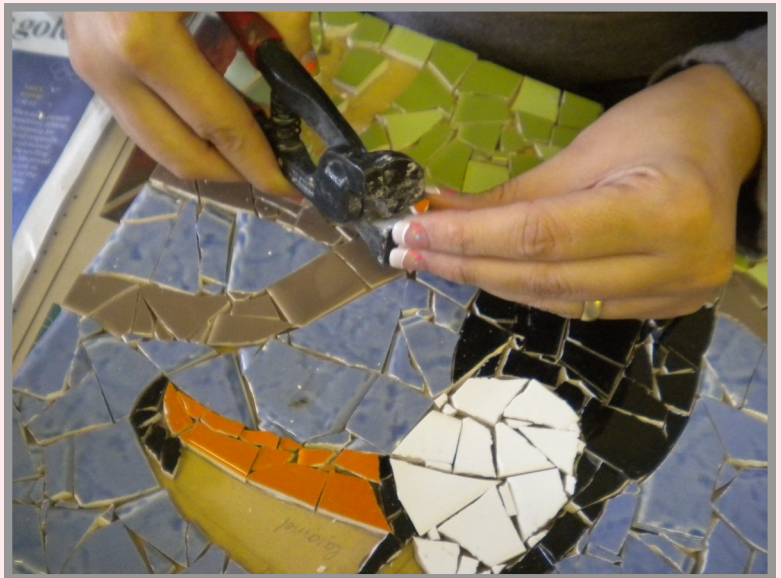
Connections UnitingCare is a community organization with a vision of empowering children, families and young people, particularly supporting those that are marginalized or disadvantaged. As part of this vision, the office in Prahran operates a Family Violence Counselling Service for survivors of family violence. This Service offers confidential, no-cost counselling as well as support groups including the Connections Art Group.



“I feel like I am in a Club of
empowered women”



“Who would have thought a few months ago we would be outside making concrete... down on our knees hammering tiles and using all this equipment we have never seen before?”





“I wanted to produce a piece I will always have as a sort of acknowledgement, holding what I had been through. I wanted something I would always see... that the time was dark but not so dark that I couldn't get through it.”

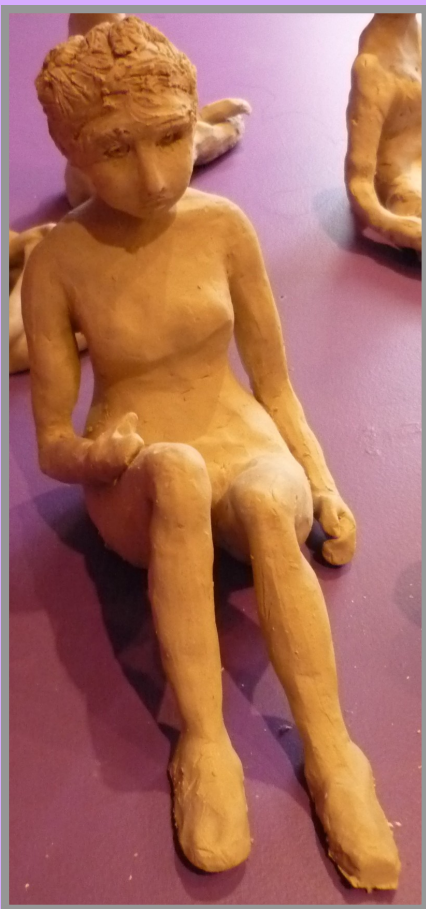


"The clay feels soft and smooth, it encourages me to be more relaxed, less anxious, and more patient . . . I become more gentle with myself."



“I wanted to find a different way of expressing myself; to find a way to express myself without always having to talk about the bad stuff.”





Clay model by Margee



“It was good knowing that I could come on some days and just switch off and relax — it’s therapeutic.”

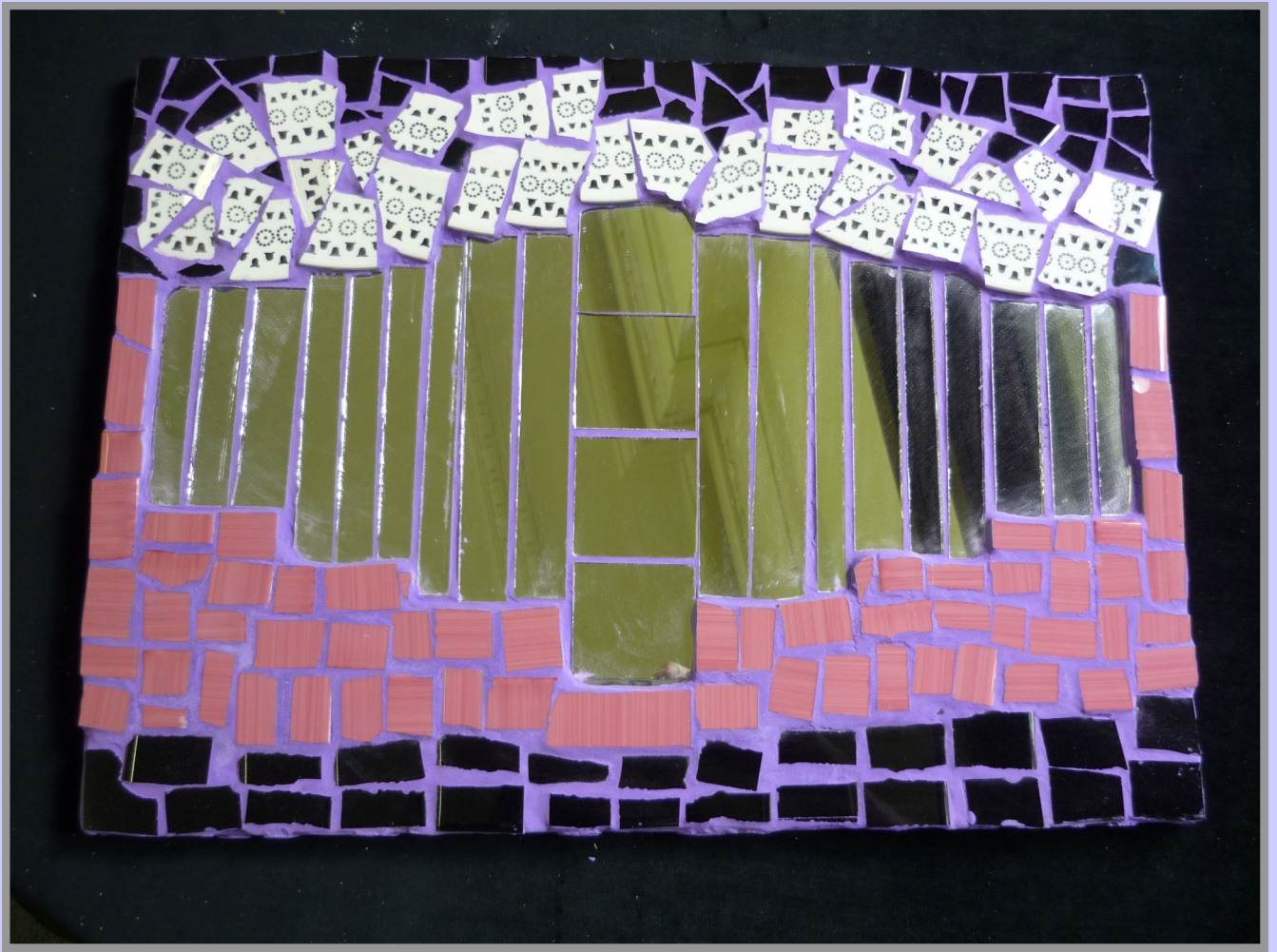


Artwork by Margee

"I feel happy and confident when I do my artwork...
I really enjoy being sociable and having fun with all
the women around..."

"It's given me the courage to try something new – to
not just write things off. It was good for me to have
a project to focus on, to not be in my head all the
time. When it was pack up time I felt 'Oh damn!'"

"The Art means a lot to me. Working with clay has
helped me learn that it's more about the journey
that matters . . . making my Art has meant that I can
express myself in a more positive way."



“It’s amazing how focusing on
such a little thing can make
such a big difference.”





"The lovely thing about clay is that you form it and allow it to reveal itself. That can be a challenging process because when you have difficult feelings you don't know how it is going to be and you have to connect to those feelings, but when it's done it's good to see the feelings out there and to give the feelings form. It's incredibly empowering to actually give it form – such a healing process, much more than talking – they have incredibly powerful meaning."

– Rhonda

Joanne Donne and Rhonda

‘giving feelings form’

Transforming trauma through art therapy

Most programs that address family violence rely on telling and talking. An art therapy group provided by the Connections family violence counselling program enables survivors of violence to express themselves in a different way. This article records a conversation between Joanne Donne, a counsellor at Connections, and Rhonda, who participated in the art therapy group.

The Connections Art Group began as a response to women requesting ‘something more’ after completing a support group for women who had experienced family violence or some form of abuse. Each of the ten week groups used either clay or mosaics as the medium.

We asked artist Anne Riggs to be involved in a project involving art as a medium to express the feelings associated with the trauma of abuse.

In her thesis, Anne asks:

What can art contribute to wellbeing following this experience? It is an immersion into the creative spaces of artists who look at what hurts, disturbs and stultifies in order to offer what reveals, transforms and restores ... it is an immersion into creating art with a group of women who inhabit this shadowy world of trauma and carry the stigmata of their experience and asks: how can being part of a shared creative practice contribute to these women’s wellbeing?

Art and Wellbeing: The Creative Space in the Shadow of Trauma, Grief and Loss, Anne Riggs, Ph D, 2010.

The group provides a space for women to express their experience of trauma while building a sense of community and safety. Through the artistic process, they are challenged to learn creative skills and to actively express feelings associated with past distress.

The following is a summary of a discussion I had with Rhonda, a participant in one of their groups. The group targeted women who already had some experience of counselling or group support.

How did the group contribute to your personal journey?

The group contributed in a really unexpected way. I had sat so long in the counselling chair articulating my distress, feeling only overwhelming emotion. I felt stuck, frustrated and just wanted to make sense of my past.

I like the fact that we were able to engage in the group in a positive and expressive way rather than just talking about our feelings. I was given the choice of how much I showed or expressed. For me, choice is a huge thing — it’s much easier to extend my boundaries if I have this choice.

I engaged with the clay and stepped into a whole new realm. With each creative task I felt brave enough to give form and shape to all that I had never been able to express before. To visually see what I have made and expressed has transformed my perceptions of it — instead of being vague, it is real. I was quite shocked to see what I had made. It was so powerful, to see that physicality, to see how I had responded to what was inside. I had stepped outside myself; instead of being overwhelmed by my feelings, I had empathy and compassion for myself for the first time.

The most important piece was one I made of a little girl— how I was carrying shame, how I couldn’t face things.

What was it like making your artwork?

To have a lump of clay and make it into something was a challenge! It allowed me to open up, to expand, to relate to myself and to others, to see things differently, to step beyond carrying trauma, and to be consumed by trauma. I have started to heal, rather than just to feel.

I found I was creating figures of women, which was helping me create a new way of being for myself. Instead of being locked in a child's experience (of abuse), I realized I was allowing myself to grow up, to connect with my adult body.

I made an important piece one day when we were focusing on relationships. For me this is the 'front and back.' See Page xxx I realized I was so burdened by the past. For the first time I could see how I could open up to the front, to the future, I could stand up straight. It changed how I carried my physicality in my body. I claimed my body back.

How did it help you to 'claim your body back'?

I physically carry myself in a new way. I am not invisible; I am not hiding from the shame. The shame is not physically located in my body as it was. I used to feel that I had to blend in all the time.

In experiencing this new physicality, I decided to do a triathlon. This meant pushing myself physically and mentally in ways I had never done before. I concentrated on being resilient, to keep my awareness of my vulnerabilities and still be strong. A really big hurdle was to allow other people to see me vulnerable (in training) and to allow them to respond to my vulnerabilities.

I am dreaming new dreams that I thought were out of my reach. I am not in the corner feeling ashamed anymore.

What were the challenges in coming to the art group?

What was really challenging was to put my whole being into a piece and have others comment on this. The risk that my inner world would be seen was hard.

It took an enormous amount of effort and courage to turn up every week. I was challenged to be less controlling about everything. In the past, this was how I made myself be safe — I had to control everything, to not have surprises. The group was about opening up to the unknown and that carried a lot of risks. I didn't know what would be mirrored back in my work. Is that what my fear looks like? In seeing vulnerabilities in other women in the group, I saw my own.

Over time, it became easier to go to the group as I was curious to see how my pieces had worked. To see similar transformation in the other women was a great feeling. It was easier to see changes in others rather than seeing my changes, and then this helped me see my own.

The art helped me to make sense — not through logic, but to just give my feelings form. I see my artwork at home all the time and see them in this new light rather than through my old lens. I didn't know that the way I walked and held myself physically was connected to carrying all this stuff (from the past) on my back.

Whilst we all have a similar shared experience of trauma, the group offered me an opportunity to experience myself as someone who is creative, rather than someone who is only a survivor of family violence. It's about experiencing myself differently.



Rhonda

“To nurture one's self is to
nurture your soul.
To be one with yourself is to
understand who you are.
To express yourself is to be free.
To let go is to explore the inner
realms of one's self.”
~ Victoria



"It always amazes me how what is happening in Life around me comes out in my Art."



“We were pushed along to produce something . . . and to think of its meaning.”





“I didn’t want to get up today but I knew the art group was on...
so here I am.”



"The task was about the expression of a relationship between 2 pieces – the concept of interaction."

"It was all about the back and the burden – having the trauma put on me having the experiences weigh heavy on me It really has a huge impact, I didn't see it coming, it was imposed on me.

The first sculpture is about the past and how all those experiences accumulate – the baggage. The second one is about the healing process and lifting up and opening up and breathing and looking up and feeling and experiencing life in quite a different way. The movement counteracts the burden and the weight of the past. Now I'm opening up and taking in the sun and having space to be myself. I'm empowered, I have choices, I can step forward into things, I can be."

- Rhonda





"A community of similar experiences that entwines us together." - Maree



"I am really aware of some of the struggles that I had doing the mosaic as it touched on me. It was nice when I could catch the feelings that I was thinking on."



“As life throws us challenges we rise or fall,
not always believing we have the strength
... sometimes we have no choice.

This gives us strength.
Our children are our source of strength.”

~Lucy



Clay model by Margee

“Without words
Forms come to life
Creativity as an escape.”







A Bowl for Sorrows

An empty leaky vessel;
Look from the outside
A hollow concave sieve
Tear shaped puncture wounds
In fragile pale porous skin
Like ruby pomegranate seeds
Bursting in bittersweetness
Of loss and love.
Soft curved edges
Unconscious shaping of the letter s
The soul of a son
Paroxysms of grief
Delicate brittle walls drying and cracked
But open to love and light

Now place a candle in its heart;
Look from the inside
Light and warmth radiating from voids
A soft flickering of light
Shining pinpricks like the Milky Way
Igniting the darkness
With tender memories contained
Recollections of happy times
Of unconditional love
Kindling warmth and loving kindness
Like a beacon of strength
A flame of hope
Lighting the night.



Nativity Scene by Rhonda



Angel by Hannah





“I get so immersed in this... time goes by so quickly... I just love doing this.”



“I have not let anything stand in my way of
coming to the group each week.
Making mosaics has made me focused.
I realize I can use this form
as my outlet and have joined
an art class outside of Connections.”
Annete

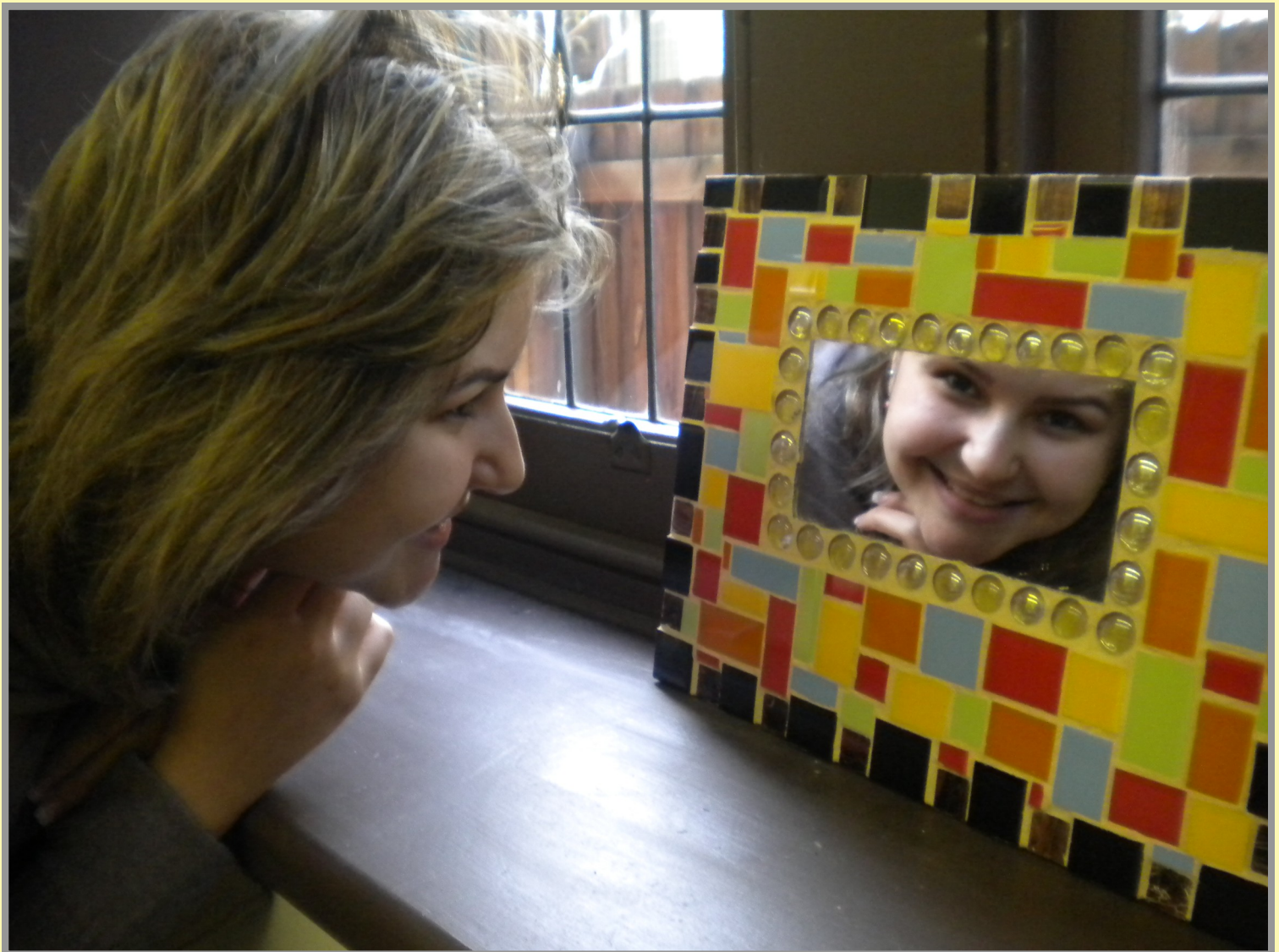


“Four little hands
With many little fingers
Each an angel in their own way
Four little life lines
That makes everything OK



Whirlwinds of scientific musical notes
And happy written hand.
Colours entwined,
Who belongs where?
We all belong together.”
Dee

"I got a surprise at the union of the group, we got quite close. It was sad, what the women, what we had passed through. In the class, there was no moment I thought about what I passed through, I just felt happy. It makes me forget about the sad things. "



Anny



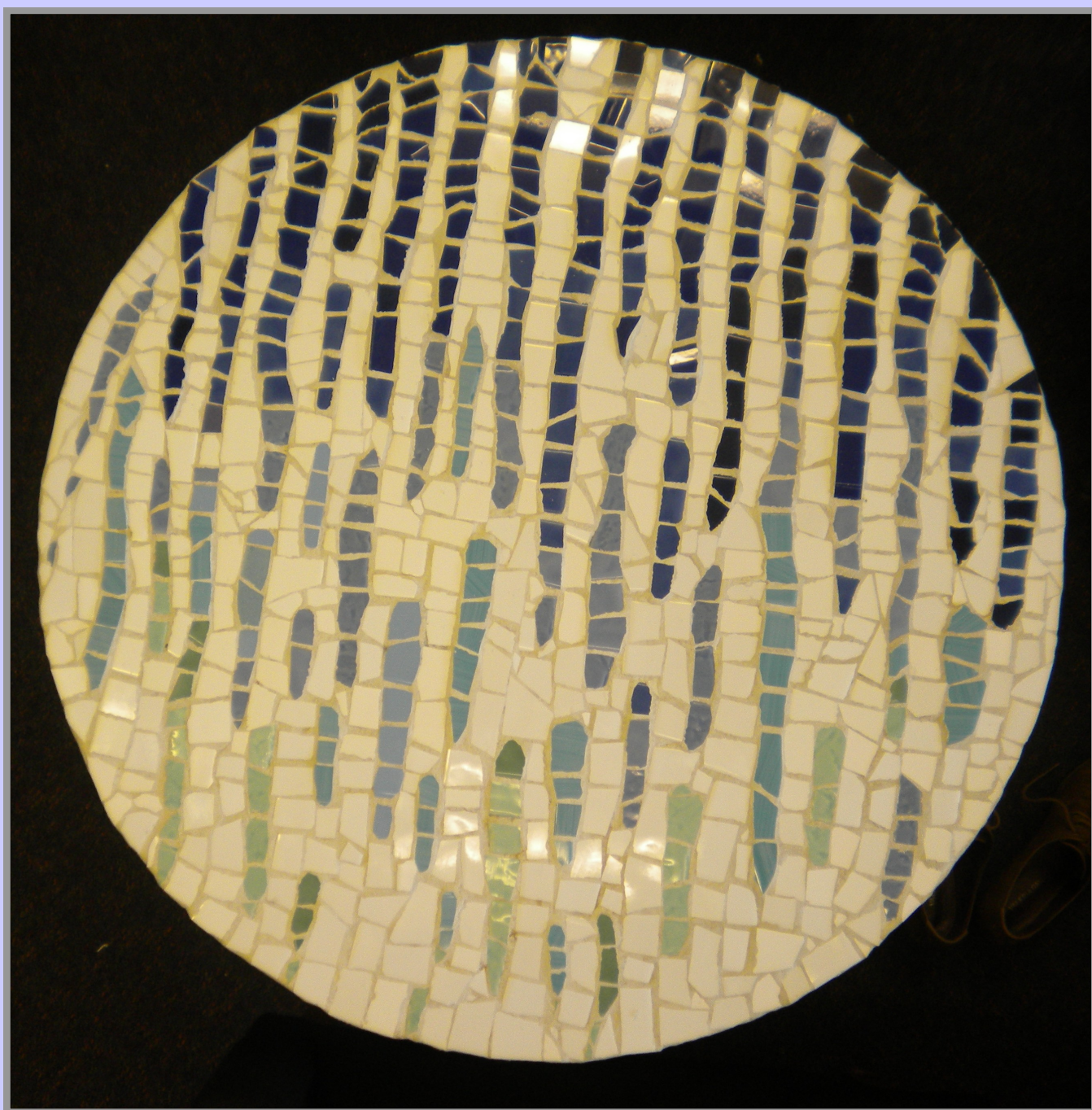
" I created this from feelings that I have at home, you know, my parents, my family, my country (name of country). I use colour so I don't see the dark side of life. . . to make me happy. I really am so proud of myself, and I get emotional . . . this is the first time in Australia that I'm doing something for myself and it's been such a pleasure to do it and see the results. A few days after leaving the class I feel like I missed it but the spirit of the colours is in me. That's the colours that I came from. Happiness and, you know, no dark side, they keep me strong here"



“It gave me a sense of peace...
it wasn't about trauma and bad
memories.” ~Rivkeh



“In the beginning I felt out of sorts as I thought I didn’t have the talent and didn’t belong... but then I thought, it’s just about being in the present and just focusing on the three hours... as time progressed, I felt more comfortable in the group”





Maree





"Even if you have been broken, it's possible to stand tall, be something different from what everyone sees."



“I really like smashing the tiles and putting the pieces together... I am in my own little world and am laughing again.”



Heart mosaic by Dee



"Old, dormant trees with new growth – showing how even when there's not much hope, there's still something beautiful that can come out of it"



Margee





“We were tied together without knowing everyone’s story; it was helpful to focus on our creativity and not the abuse and this helped us feel normal.”



Group Piece

Shirley

"I have finished the Winter Girl ...Food theme wearing an apron with food on it ...

When you get a group of women together it is not too long before you get talking about food, or hearing about peoples eating disorders. Trauma and the stress of Life in General shows very much in how I find myself eating. So that is the theme of her."





"I guess with the summer one I want it to be "freer" if that makes any sense. Summer our bodies enjoy the freedom of being outdoors more... because the weather is nicer ..."



"I never regret finally getting help but it has been a struggle,
that is for sure. I am not sure I will ever have the confidence
to do a lot of things.

I hope one day to feel safer in the world.

I hope to look after my body better.

Not fall into bad patterns that make life more difficult.

But most of all I want to learn to have fun and not take life
quite so seriously.

I want to do something because I want to..."