

Art Therapy Online: ATOL

Safe Spaces at Safe Shelters: Witness to Violence

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Introduction to the documentary

Michelle Atlas

In 2007 I travelled to Johannesburg, South Africa and volunteered with the team at Lefika La Phodiso – The Art Therapy Centre. Lefika facilitates art therapy trainings and programs throughout under-resourced communities. Inspired by the passion and grass roots approach to building capacity I chose to stay for two and a half years.

In May 2008 xenophobic violence broke out in townships throughout South Africa. Thousands of people were displaced and forced out of their homes and communities. Lefika responded to the violent events by providing therapeutic services to 900 residents of a Centre of Safe Shelter (refugee camp) established a month after the attacks. The project was supported by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation and the South African Human Rights Commission.

Our team of art counsellors provided consistent support to the residents by visiting the site regularly. I led the team as the project manager. We made art materials available for the community to process their traumatic experiences, the transient nature of the lives and their unknown futures. It was a

challenging experience. We were confronted with the limitations of what we could offer when basic needs of safety, food and shelter were barely able to be met. We were also challenged by the projected anger and frustration that the residents felt towards South African society and the injustices they had experienced.

Ethics regarding the nature of our work was constantly debated amongst our team as we questioned how to provide a safe space when the ordinary boundaries and structures of our training and profession, such as privacy, a closed room or the protection of the art work all had to be approached creatively and flexibly; we had to adapt to the reality of the situation. There were no buildings and limited spare tents in which to run programs, so we facilitated sessions in an open field. Resources in the camp were limited, so we used accessible materials such as cardboard and newspapers.

As the ongoing maintenance and existence of the camps was debated in the political arena, uncertainty about where residents would go next heightened anxiety in the community. Questions concerning their voice and acknowledgement of existence arose. For people with no home, no possessions and no identity documents, the artwork they created in the therapeutic sessions reflected a testament to their experiences and selves. At the end of September 2008 the camps were closed and the people were moved on.

With the camps closed no evidence of the violence or the people who had been affected by it remained. In response to their desire to have their story told, and in collaboration with the community, Lefika developed the exhibition 'Safe Spaces at Safe Shelters'. Safe Spaces was a multidimensional exhibition conveying the displaced community's journey and struggle to be heard, recognised and understood. Curated in the heart of Johannesburg, Safe Spaces advocated for the rights of, and informed the public about, the traumatic stories of people displaced by xenophobia.

The exhibition included a re-integration program for students and teachers living within areas affected by the violence. Classes were invited to attend the exhibition and reflect on the refugee experience and the events which took place in their communities. Some of the participants had witnessed the violence being perpetrated against others. The education program provided a creative space within which to explore opinions and perceptions of refugees and foreign nationals, to consider the refugee experience and the trauma of discrimination.

The documentary 'Safe Spaces at Safe Shelters: Witness to Violence follows the Lefika team into the camps, the exhibition and through the education program.

Keywords: art therapy, trauma, xenophobia, refugees, community development

For further information please visit:

www.arttherapycentre.co.za

See also:

Atlas, M. (2009). Experiencing Displacement: Using art therapy to address xenophobia in South Africa. *Development*, 52(4), 531-536

Berman, H. (2010). Active Witnessing: Lefika La Phodiso's Response to the South African xenophobic crisis. *Journal of Psycho-Social Studies*, 4(1), 6-31

Michelle Atlas

Michelle is a Master of Art Therapy graduate from La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia. Having embraced a passion for the cohesion of art therapy and community development, Michelle has lived in a rural Nepalese community for 10 months and worked in Johannesburg, South Africa for three years facilitating grass roots art therapy programs and encouraging the creative application of therapeutic tools with people living in under-resourced

communities. Michelle is currently Team Leader at the Bright Futures – Children’s Specialist Support Service for the North West Region of Melbourne. Bright Futures provides therapeutic support and enhanced case management for children affected by homelessness and family violence.