Blog

Arts and Media



In one art therapy group, we explored painting with watercolor. I wanted the boys to explore landscapes and visualize where they feel calm. It was fun because a lot of them had never tried painting with watercolor — and look at how good they are at it! (Caileigh Pattisall)



by Caileigh Pattisall

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I have been reflecting on how established I now feel in my placement site with Good Shepherd Volunteers and how much of myself I have brought into this role this year.

Both of my parents are artists, so I grew up in a household that prioritized creativity. When I was in middle school, my mom and I started an art summer camp for elementary school students. It was so much fun to engage with the kids in our community — and a great side hustle to make some money while my mom was on summer break from being a teacher. Over the years, I learned much about art, creating lesson plans and implementing those plans with children.

In college, I led my own art groups every summer for an overnight summer camp, Camp Kesem. I loved being their art coordinator, and it was empowering, having ownership over my own projects while also working with the overarching team. But after I graduated from college and stopped doing camps, I didn't know how this would translate to the field of social justice I wanted to go into.

The first few days on the job at Barbara Blum Residence, I remember feeling lost. I started out as a youth development counselor, essentially leading the boys through their days and redirecting their behavior when needed, and I felt out of my element. I'd never done anything remotely like this and didn't know how I was going to last.



Unfortunately, I don’t have a photo of the particular day making the bracelets with the boys. This is, however, a good representation of how I spend a lot of my commutes to work on the train. (Caileigh Pattisall)

It was their last few days of summer in the residence before starting school, so our days consisted of movies, music, and playing pool — lots of downtime. I like to make bracelets when I'm bored or have free time, and all you really need is some string and a water bottle to tie it on to while you work. Without thinking anything of it, I began to make a bracelet to pass the time while the boys watched a TV show.

Almost immediately, a few of the boys leaned in.

"Miss Caileigh, what're you doing?" one of the boys asked. He had never talked to me before.

I explained to him that I like to make bracelets and that it's not too hard. I had extra materials in my bag, so I took a chance and asked, "Do y'all want to learn how to make them?"

Before I knew it, all five boys — 16- and 17-year-old juvenile offenders — were sitting on the floor in a circle with me. We chose colors, and they helped each other get situated. We spent the next hour focused on establishing our patterns in the string.

One of the other youth development counselors leaned over and asked me, "Hey, what should I call this?" He was referring to the log the house keeps of what activities the boys do every day. He decided to categorize it as an art group facilitated by Miss Caileigh.

When it was time for me to leave for the day, I said my goodbyes.

"Will you be here tomorrow, Miss Caileigh?" one of the boys asked. "I'm gonna need help on my bracelet."

"Of course," I replied. "I'll see you tomorrow." To be honest, I didn't want to leave that day.

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In the first official art therapy group I led, the exercise was to first list out individuals or things in our lives that bring us joy. We then associated color to each of the things on our list. (Caileigh Pattisall)

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The boys then had time to reflect how those things interact in their lives and paint how they felt in an abstract way. (Caileigh Pattisall)

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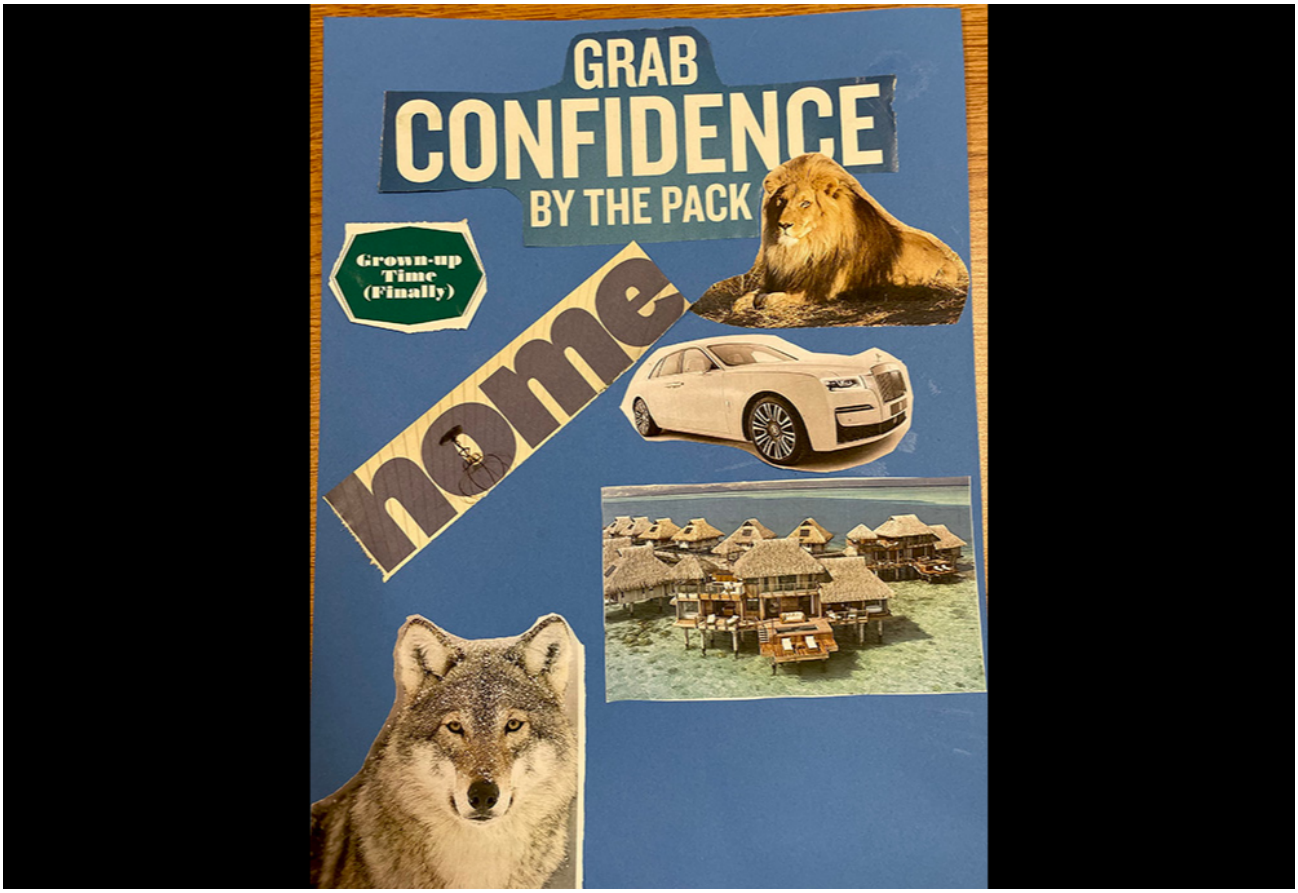
This was a calming and grounding exercise, and they were all excited to share what their colors meant to them. (Caileigh Pattisall)

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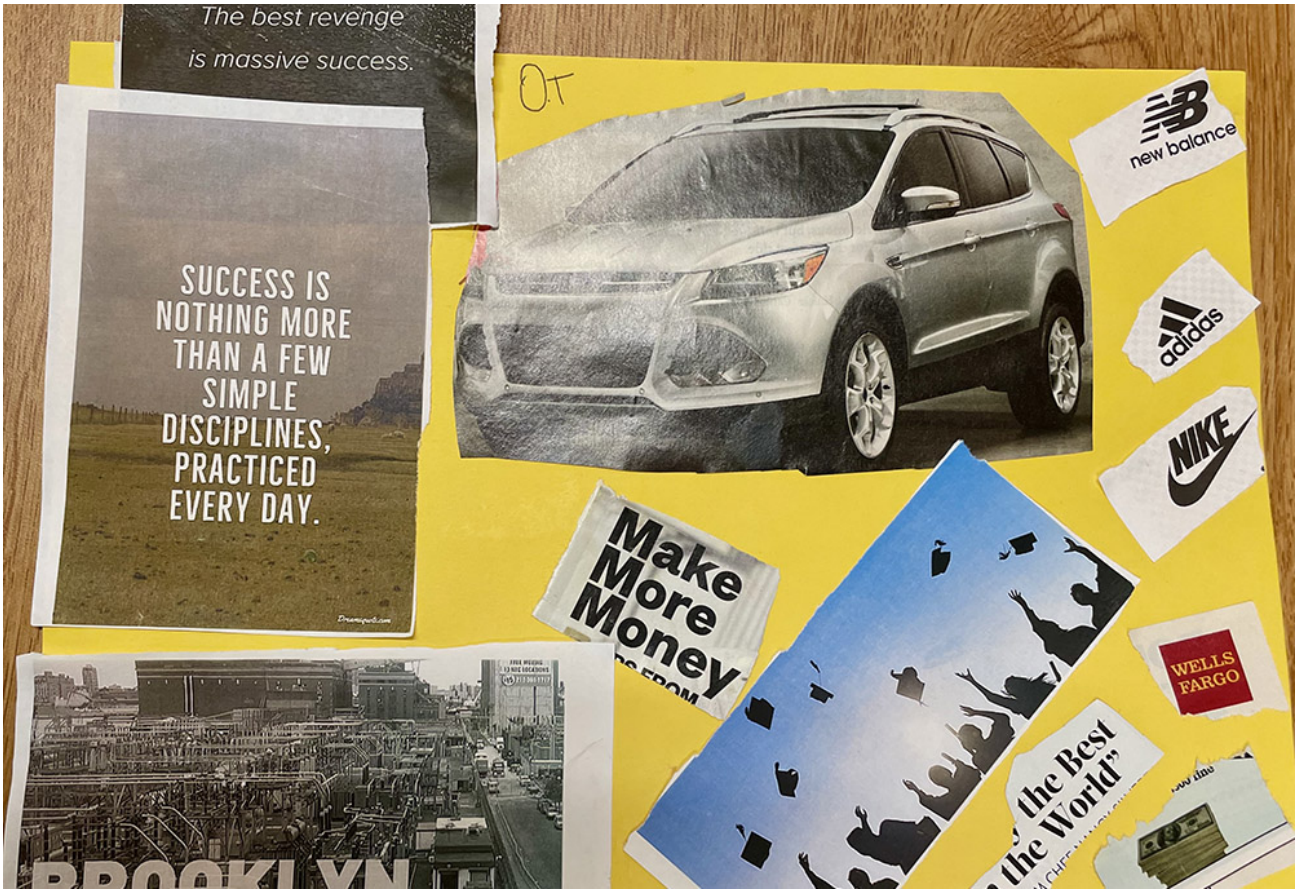
Their art is now hanging in the living room where they do their groups. (Caileigh Pattisall)

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We made vision boards from old magazines. The boys were able to express their goals and reflect on what they hope to have one day. (Caileigh Pattisall)

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It sounds silly now that my first breakthrough with the boys was just getting them to make bracelets with me, but it meant a lot. It was the first real start of establishing a relationship with each one of them, along with something that felt familiar to me. It meant the boys were beginning to trust me, and they felt comfortable enough to ask me to make them a bracelet over the weekend. When I delivered on Monday, their trust in me increased. I was slowly but surely becoming a part of their community.

This was back in August. Now, it's April, and I'm running my own art therapy group every Thursday. It's been fun to plan and facilitate these groups, but more so to watch the boys be creative. It's been special to cultivate a calming space where the youth can feel how they feel and express themselves in a way where they don't have to talk. I've included pictures of their work so far, and I hope you all like the virtual art gallery.

I've come so far from the first month being at my placement site, from feeling discouraged and lost to feeling confident enough to have my own group. It's a good reminder that you're always going to be new at something, and that can be scary. But you have to trust that your past experiences have prepared you to handle your current one. I'm grateful for the growth I've seen in myself this year and excited to see what it's preparing me for.

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