

Rehab colored with art, compassion

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Sierra Kay, 24, of Dracut, poses with a painting donated to Toward Independent Living and Learning in Billerica through The Art Connection, an organization that donates art to nonprofits. On Thursday, 19 pieces of art were unveiled at TILL, where Kay is a client. SUN/CHRIS CAMIRE

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BILLERICA -- James McDonald believes people should have art in their lives.

As executive director of The Art Connection, an organization that places original artwork in community service organizations, McDonald has seen firsthand how a painting or photograph can enrich the dreariest office space.

So it was no surprise this week that McDonald had a wide smile on his face at Toward Independent Living and Learning, when 19 pieces of art by 15 artists

were donated to the Boston Road day-habilitation program.

"They did a beautiful job of featuring the art and varying their selections," said McDonald, as he made his way through the building Thursday afternoon. "Each work they selected is so different."

TILL is a 30-year-old private, nonprofit human-service agency that works to help individuals with mental retardation, behavioral and learning disabilities, autism, emotional problems, brain injury and other developmental problems.

In addition to four-day habilitation programs, including the Billerica facility, the agency runs 45 group homes throughout Eastern Massachusetts and Southern New Hampshire.

On Thursday afternoon, about a half-dozen Massachusetts artists who donated their artwork to permanently hang in TILL attended a reception at the facility. They were warmly thanked by the facility's staff, who said the art has brightened the building's mood.

"It makes this place feel so different," said Donna Parker, TILL's office manager, noting

that the original art replaces mass-produced "cookie-cutter" poster prints that once hung in the halls.

"It really livens the atmosphere," Parker continued. "I know the staff appreciates it, and the individuals appreciate it, too."

Since its inception in 1995, The Art Connection has placed more than 4,000 pieces of artwork throughout the Boston area. These original art

creations are donated by 270 artists and collectors.

Faith Hyde, of Cambridge, donated two small drawings showing comiclike figures waiting for a movie to start inside a cinema. Another drawing by Hyde depicts a young boy waiting for a bus. They both now hang near the facility's entrance.

"If it can enrich their lives, it makes me feel wonderful," said Hyde. "And it's also wonderful to have an audience."

Linda Clave, of Brighton, donated a large abstract painting called "Pear Heart" done in cool blue tones and lava-like oranges.

"I'm happy to see my artwork can make a difference in an environment like this," said Clave.

Within the healing environment of TILL, McDonald hopes the original works of art will provide opportunities for reflection, inspiration, comfort and hope.

"This is one of the only ways nonprofits like this can acquire original artwork without having deep pocketbooks," said McDonald. "I consider today to be a success."

The Art Connection's art placement program is funded by individual donors and the Massachusetts Cultural Council.