

Compassion through Art

By Loretta Viscuso

As a design teacher in a public school, the art institute Vittoria in Trento, Italy, I ask myself how to bring my young students closer to values like compassion. My lessons provide the opportunity for them to design a heart-project using their artistic skills. Where better than in actual places where art can improve the quality of life?

This year we have been working on a project to install decorative panels in the surgery ward of the Borgo Roma Hospital in Verona. This allows the students to reflect on suffering and to see first-hand the often private stories of the patients and their families.

A kind and sympathetic doctor helped us to organize a meeting at the hospital so the students could understand the hospital environment and the needs of the patients and staff, and to find a sponsor to pay for the materials. We began lessons at school to discuss how art can help to improve the quality of life in that place.

We chose nature as the theme of our project, and decided to draw some of the plants in the garden of the hospital. What patients often do to feel better is to look outside their window – and nature is a balm for any pain.

I proposed that the students use decorative patterns from the Japanese tradition. Each student chose one motif and we have enlarged them, slightly changing them by adding our little drawings of plants in the hospital garden. The work was really quite demanding. We started in October 2007 and are now almost finished.

Because of the nature of the project, the students needed to focus on what they were doing in order to be able to do it well; and little by little the class became more concentrated and silent. It is often difficult to get seventeen and eighteen-year-olds to concentrate on something, distracted as they are by cell phones and text messaging. They don't have many opportunities to experience the kind of silence that comes from being totally absorbed in what



Art as a kind of meditation.

one is doing. However, they slowly began to feel that the time of our lessons had become too short! And when one of the students decided to take a job instead of coming to class, I asked if he'd like to finish it at home. We all doubted he'd keep his promise – but a few days before the end of the school year he turned up with a beautifully completed panel.

These young artists, the doctors, the patients and their families will be in attendance at an opening exhibition at the hospital in October. ☸