

Therapist helps kids draw their way to healing

By **FRANK BODANI**
Staff writer

When Mary draws pictures of her family, they are always of sunny scenes with flowers and a nice, neat house. Patty, meanwhile, draws her family standing in little boxes, separated from one another.

In Patty's pictures, the boxes keep her relatives from reaching out and touching, from giving a hug or providing affection.

Though Mary and Patty — not their real names — are sisters living in the same house, they draw strikingly different family portraits.

It's Karen Stabley's job to sort out what these pictures mean and how they relate to family life. Stabley is a full-time art therapist at the Lehman Center, 400 W. Market St.

Mary is 6. Patty is 4. Stabley says their mother is a single parent and their father fades in and out of their lives, sometimes acting kind, sometimes threatening.

"The older sister has learned to put on a pretty face, like everything is OK," Stabley said.

"The 4-year-old hasn't learned how to cover up yet," Stabley said. "She's more realistic. From her pictures I begin to understand what their situation is really like."

Some kids find it too difficult to talk about their problems. So Stabley has them draw.

After starting out as a visual artist, Stabley had hit a brick wall. "I realized I couldn't make any money doing this."

So she decided to get a master's degree in art therapy from Hahnemann Medical Center and Hospital in Philadelphia. For the last eight years she has tried to help solve kids' problems through art.

After working at the Lehman Center part time for almost a year, Stabley was hired in January as its first full-time art therapist. The Lehman Center is a crisis nursery for children up to age 6. It offers 72-hour care and counseling for kids who come from potentially abusive home situations, according to director Angela Fogle.

The problem is, many of these children — or clients, as Stabley likes to call them — don't want to talk about their problems right away.

"It's hard to talk about physical and sexual abuse," Fogle said. "They need another way to help relieve what's built up inside."

"At first, a lot of kids are ashamed," Stabley said. "Art can help them express themselves without having to come right out and say it."

So they paint. Or draw. Or do chalk designs. Or play sand games.

Drawing is one of the most popular activities among her 30 clients, Stabley said. Fogle said many more children are on a waiting list for the sessions.

"Karen says no drawing tells everything, but every drawing tells something about the child," Fogle said.

There seem to be "thousands and trillions" of things Stabley said she looks for in each piece of art.

She explains a few examples: "In di-

vorce, the child may feel helpless and angry, so they draw people with no hands. They feel they have no way of reaching out; they can't grasp anything.

"If the child is depressed, say from neglect, their drawings may be empty, with no color or detail.

"With abuse, I see a lot of missing body parts."

Or if the child is being hit or beaten at home, she said, the child may draw parents with extra big hands. "Because all they see is this hand up close, right across their face," Stabley said.

Children who appear to be in troubled situations are referred to the center through concerned relatives, school guidance counselors or churches, Fogle said.

And though the center usually takes kids only up to age 6, Stabley's sessions include teen-agers.

If children have difficulty talking about problems, Stabley gets involved. First, she has them draw 10 to 12 preliminary pictures for evaluation.

"The kids who can't draw are the better candidates," she said. "People who can draw can hide better in their work."

Then in 30- to 40-minute sessions once a week, Stabley's clients draw about whatever they want. Progress, she said, as in any type of psychotherapy, is often slow and may be never-ending.

"The goal is to eventually get the child comfortable with talking about their problems," Stabley said.

And at that point, she said, the healing process can finally begin.



GREG MAHANY/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Lehman Center art therapist Karen Stabley meets with one of her young clients in her office.