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Photos display children's lives

By Erica Noonan, Globe Staff | May 20, 2004

ARLINGTON -- The photos range from a portrait of a favorite occupational therapy teacher to a snapshot of a handmade cross marking the grave of a pet fish named Jaws.

"I really miss my fish," the photographer, 10-year-old Casey, noted alongside.

At first, the idea was to document children and families affected by mental illness through a series of essays and photo portraits. But then staff at the Framingham-based Wayside Youth and Family Support Network had a more innovative idea: Why not let the children take the pictures and let their work speak for itself?

So they put two dozen disposable cameras into the hands of children enrolled in programs at Wayside and the Walker Home and School in Needham.

The children have brain conditions including autism, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, schizophrenia, developmental delays, Tourette's syndrome, depression, and bipolar disease. Some have suffered physical, psychological, and sexual abuse. For many, self-expression in any form is no easy task.

But the photos were unusual in their normalcy. The children produced images of everyday school life -- the ominous corner of a principal's office where discipline is meted out, a friend goofing around in class, and exotic shots of Boston curiosities, such as a gilded lion in front of the Fairmont Copley Plaza hotel. Others focused their lenses on the natural world, like Jimmy, 9, who photographed a downed tree. "It is a stump," he wrote. "The tree got cut down. That is sad."

"There weren't any weird pictures," said Anne Sullivan, a Wayside parent support coordinator and organizer of the project. "It was a surprise and also what we thought would happen. . . . These are kids with very normal interests -- their friends, their toys, their environment, the people they care about."

The photos are displayed in the exhibit, "Cameras in Our Hands," on display through May 28 in the children's room of the Robbins Library in Arlington.

The goal of the exhibit, a first-of-its-kind collaboration between Walker and Wayside, was to help destigmatize brain disorders that often leave children, and their families, ostracized from play dates, parties, and classroom activities most other children take for granted, Sullivan said. Families become isolated, when friends and neighbors pull away in fear or confusion.

"We want to bring mental health out of the closet," Sullivan said. "If a child has leukemia, neighbors are out on the corner, rallying and wondering what they can do to help. If a child has bipolar illness, nobody talks about it, nobody sends cards to the hospital. I have often wondered, 'Where is the Ronald McDonald House for schizophrenia?' "

About a third of the children, members of the Wayside Saturday Club, took their cameras on a field trip to downtown Boston. They spent all day prowling the Public Garden, State House, and Copley Plaza, said erin O'Toole, who works with Wayside youth. (O'Toole does not capitalize her first name.) "The kids really thought about which images they wanted to frame and took their time."

Terry Maguire, 13, of Natick, a Saturday Club participant who attends a residential program at the Reed Academy in Framingham, shot a sun-drenched photo chosen for the exhibit titled "Shine on Me" as he walked near Boston Common.

Terry, a Special Olympics track and field athlete who struggles with developmental problems, will accompany his mother, Judy Maguire, to a reception for the exhibit today. It will be the first time Terry has seen his creative efforts on public display. "We are both really looking forward to it," said his mother. "He loves to be the center of attention."

Parents and teachers said they hope the project, presented in honor of Children's Mental Health Month, will be a boost to their confidence.

"These kids took an emotional risk to be part of the project," Sullivan said. "To know that their pictures mean something and are important enough to be shown in a public space is a very big deal for them."

Susan Ramsay's 10-year-old son, Scott, shot a photo of an administrative office at Walker, where he is a residential student. "This is the place that kids go when they are having a problem," he notes in the accompanying photo caption on display at the exhibit.

Scott struggles with behavioral issues and has a low frustration tolerance, his mother said. His creative work, the sort of photo that could have been taken by any fourth-grader at any public school, is an excellent way to educate people unfamiliar with, or afraid of, children with developmental delays.

"People don't understand, and people often don't want to understand," said Susan Ramsay. "It can be an incredibly isolating experience. But I'd like to see people look beyond stereotypes, to see the child behind the behaviors."

Emily Powers, a teacher at Walker, said one of the unexpected benefits of the project was some glimmer of insight into the emotional lives of the children. One boy who lives in foster care was only interested in shooting portraits of favorite staff members who serve as extended family members. Another girl spent most of her film capturing images of favorite books and compact discs. Another student, who struggles with writing skills, used the photo project as inspiration to type out paragraphs of a personal biography.

Next year, the photos could be used to help student-photographers make connections beyond writing and visual arts. "We can use the photos to talk about a lot of different subjects -- math, history, and science," Powers said. "We'll definitely do it again next year."