



## **Art is a Voice**

Enid Garber

In my 36 years as a Clinical Art Therapist for Miami-Dade Public Schools, I provided clinical services to children who were in a self-contained classroom setting for children with Severely Emotionally Disabilities. Justin was one of the children I worked with from kindergarten when he was five years old until the end of fifth grade. When I first met Justin, he was a somber, quiet, five-year-old who did not make sustained eye contact. Together, he and I began a six-year therapeutic relationship. Justin participated in weekly Individual Art Therapy sessions. Justin's presented with artistic skills, which were more in line with an eight-year-old, suggesting an area of strength and potential for academic and emotional growth.

Justin's divorced parents were diagnosed with bipolar and schizophrenia respectively. Their interrelationship was fraught with contention, but each parent loved their son very much. Overwhelmed by his parents' mental illnesses resulting in out-of-control emotions, Justin had difficulty both with regulating his own emotions and focusing on schoolwork. Art would be the voice he would listen to and find reassurance, a sense of calm. organization, competency, pleasure, and gratitude.

Fast forward to the start of fifth grade, Justin's last year of elementary school. I approached him with the idea of a creative project for his last year in Art Therapy with me. He stated proudly that he wanted to illustrate and write a book. A brave challenge. Justin couldn't read. I said yes. We formed a plan to make it happen. Justin would complete all the drawings first. Once completed, he would dictate the story from his drawings to me and I would type what he said and read it back to him. Justin was ready



to challenge himself with the confidence and strength he had developed in his creative process. His artistic growth and emotional development were my gratitude.

During a four-month time, Justin completed 15 individual drawings, each taking between an hour to an hour and a half to complete. He approached each drawing with colored pencils and confidence. He never began a drawing with a sketch and never used an erasure. I was witnessing Justin's independent, determination, organization, and personal satisfaction. He was a joy to watch. He worked in a quiet calm and self-direction. He would look up and hand me the drawing, indicating the drawing was complete. A number was written to organize the drawings in the sequence they were completed. This was more for my benefit than for Justin's. He knew his story. He had this as if the story were already written.

Justin's next challenge was to illustrate the cover and title his book. He chose to create a wooden three-dimensional sculpture of the hero of his story. This proved to be an opportunity for me to be invited into his creative process. Justin became director and I his assistant in a collaboration of problem solving. The process of forming the sculpture, choosing among scraps and a variety of wood shapes brought an awareness of the unspoken trust that we had developed. Justin was able to articulate how I could support him, and I trusted his choices and selections. We were in this together, yet Justin was in control of all creative decisions. This was his masterpiece.

The completed sculpture was photographed with Justin's choice of a dramatic backdrop. It was time for Justin to dictate his story and for me to put it into type. He told his story seamlessly from each of his drawings. It was impressive that each completed drawing was



continuing the story until the final drawing brought the story to its conclusion. I read the story back to him. I then had the pictures and typed story line printed and bound.

On the last day of school, I presented the completed book to Justin. He carefully held it and looked at the cover. He then hugged the book close to him. "What do you think Justin?" I asked. He looked up and replied, "I am so happy, I don't know what to say." Gratitude-well stated and felt in the hug.

