

# Art-making and mental health pilot project report

**By Thelma Nabukavou**

The Australia Awards Fellowship hosted by St Vincent's Hospital in Melbourne enabled Salochna Chetty and I to spend six weeks observing recovery programs, meeting carers and peer support workers and attending workshops on mental health recovery. The fellowship titled "Recovery-based training – contesting barriers for people with a serious mental illness (Pacific)" ran from 12 February, 2018 to 23 March, 2018.

While in Australia, Salochna and I also visited the National Gallery of Victoria and attended art lectures there. Together with St Vincent's Post Program Project Manager, Brigid Ryan, we met with art therapist and senior lecturer Dr Pat Fenner of La Trobe University to talk about implementing an art therapy program in Suva.

On returning to Fiji, together with Drs Odille Chang and Sefanaia Qaloewai of the Fiji National University, Ms Ryan, and Dr Fenner, we began the groundwork for a pilot art therapy program for mental health consumers, staff and carers. The program involved art-making for participants in a safe and non-judgmental space.

Dr Fenner and Ms Ryan visited Fiji in June of 2018 and held a two-day workshop (June 26-27) on art therapy at the Ministry of Health and Medical Services wellness centre. After their departure, the program commenced at the YMCA. Members and staff of the Community Recovery Outreach Program (CROP), Fiji's only post-discharge psychosocial rehabilitation program, launched the project with a Talanoa or storytelling session about recovery. Permission was sought and approved by St Giles Medical Superintendent, Dr Kiran Gaikwad to engage in-patients in the program. Staff Nurse and Occupational Therapist Mere Vasuikoro who had attended the art therapy workshop implemented her training with the patients until I joined her in December of 2018. I facilitated weekly sessions at the hospital until March 2019.

## **Background**

Recognising the therapeutic value of art, the project was designed to observe how art-making could contribute to mental health recovery

**Aim:** To explore individual and group self-expression using art materials within a recovery context.

## **Method**

Sessions ran from 9-11am with a 10-minute break after the first hour. CROP members and staff met fortnightly allowing the carers to use the other two Tuesdays in the month. There were housekeeping rules to observe like being respectful during sessions and seeking permission to take a break if the need arose. There were briefings to start the session and debriefings at the end. Sometimes there were joint sessions for CROP staff, consumers and carers. On average, 20 in-patients of St Giles would take part in one session.

## **Venue**

Most of the 52 sessions were conducted at the training room at the YMCA Youth Centre in downtown Suva and this was good because there were no distractions. The YMCA building is located about a hundred metres off the main road so there was no pedestrian or vehicular traffic to disturb the sessions. Some sessions were conducted at the CROP premises on Waimanu Road while patients and staff of St Giles used the Occupational Therapy room at the hospital.

## Budget

St Vincent's Pacific Health Fund provided F\$4,971.90 for the year-long project that began in July 2018 and ended in June 2019.

### Budget Acquittal- Grant AUD\$2985

Item	Cost \$FJD	AUD
Art materials	3,253.31	1,949.04
Transport	378.20	226.58
Hall hire	570.00	341.48
Communication	191.00	114.43
Facilitator	590.00	353.47
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,982.51</b>	<b>2,985.00</b>

## Materials

Art materials were sourced from local bookshops, hardware stores, Suva Handicraft Centre and other vendors. Dr Fenner provided oil pastels during her visits. A4 paper, acrylic paints, acrylic artist pads, black art pens, canvas, clay, coconut shells, egg cartons, embroidery cotton, fabric ink, food colouring, glitter, glue sticks, masi (barkcloth), mount board, paper doilies, pastels, pencils, PVA glue, plywood, rice, shells, framing timber, white paint, varnish, vau (inner bark of the *ochrosia oppositifolia* plant), and voivoi (pandanus leaves) were used for the project.

### Participants (core group)

Name	Status	Age as at 2019	Gender
Charles Tigarea	Consumer	27	Male
John Elbourne	Consumer	33	Male
Viliame Tagicakibau	Consumer	35	Male
Sonal Chand	Consumer	30	Male
Salochna Chetty	Orderly	42	Female
John Tuiveibose	Orderly	43	Male
Mere Vasuikoro	Nurse	-	Female
Marisia Koroitanoa	Carer	52	Female
Akosita Waqanimaravu	Carer	64	Female
Thelma Nabukavou	Carer	52	Female

There were temporary participants who took part in the sessions like Sangam Nursing School and Fiji National University nursing students, St Giles Hospital nurses and orderlies, former CROP members living in the community, a Salvation Army staff member, two University of the South Pacific students who were interns at Salvation Army, an Empower Pacific counsellor and a Lifeline Fiji volunteer. The trainee nurses took part in the

sessions as they were on attachment with the Community Recovery Outreach Program. The three staff from Salvation Army, Empower Pacific and Lifeline who had taken part in the art therapy workshop conducted by Dr Fenner and Ms Ryan attended a few sessions but changed jobs and were not able to be part of the core group. A mother and her recently diagnosed daughter joined a few sessions but later dropped out. The Psychiatric Survivors Association requested a session for them during one of their monthly meetings so I obliged.

### **Guest facilitators**

The Fiji Arts Council was requested to provide two indigenous heritage artists to conduct sessions on pottery and masi designing for CROP members, staff and carers. Amelia Lesumai, a nationally acclaimed potter, conducted a pottery session using clay she had extracted from a river bank near her home in Rewa outside of Suva. The inclusion of pottery was a deliberate attempt to observe sensory modulation using clay and water. Mrs Lesumai showed the participants how to use the clay and they produced an interesting collection of two-dimensional fish. Clay is an unfamiliar medium so some participants found it challenging while others enjoyed fashioning their creations from the soft earth. The remainder of the clay from this session was used by the in-patients and staff at St Giles. Mrs Lesumai gave me instructions on how to fire the clay which was carried out successfully two weeks later. The fish were mounted on calico stapled to plywood.

The second facilitator and masi (barkcloth) artist, Lijia Jiko, demonstrated the use of traditional dyes made from red clay, bark and soot. Mrs Jiko got the participants to design a white and a brown piece of masi. Masi is significant in the indigenous culture because it is used for chiefly attire, wedding apparel, dance costumes, wall hangings, funeral pall or gifting. Graphic artist Joseph Qalo, who used to work in the media industry and who also attended the art therapy workshop, helped with drawing and cutting stencils. Mrs Jiko used traditional motifs while the drawings by the participants were adapted for the designing process. Everyone was given an opportunity to stencil and it was fascinating handling dyes that the ancient Fijians used for decorating. The two pieces will be used as wall hangings. Pottery making and masi designing were new experiences for most of the participants. One carer remarked that she felt privileged learning about these traditional arts as they were part of her culture.

### **Artworks produced**

The Indian art form of rangoli which is usually created on the floor using rice, flour or petals and used for marriages and religious festivals was adapted for the project. Rice was dyed using food colouring and pasted randomly to plywood resulting in a landscape-like scenery. Traditional Indian designs are often geometric. The rice was also used to decorate empty unbroken coconut shells. Rangoli is supposed to create a positive pool of energy hence the decision to include it in the project. Hindus living in Fiji use rangoli as part of the yearly Diwali (Festival of Lights) decorations.

The other artworks included collages made of voivoi (pandanus leaves), doodling on paper and voivoi, paper butterflies and angels, painted fabric, pencil sketches, woven items, acrylic paintings, pastel drawings and a cardboard church covered with coloured hand cut-outs. There were different reactions from the participants during the sessions. The paper angels were popular with all the participants. The men preferred drawing, painting, and doodling instead of weaving. Mood and energy levels were monitored to ensure that participants did not become stressed. Some participants talked while they worked while others did not utter a word. The carers who were part of the core group took materials home to make their crafts if they could not attend sessions. A carer and a consumer opted for expressive art, writing poetry from home as they did not have time

to attend sessions. All the participants were encouraged to do their best, to have fun and not to worry about other people's opinions of their artwork.

### **Exhibition**

The highlight of the project was the one-day exhibition and lunch that was held at the YMCA training room on Thursday, June 27, 2019 and attended by the participants, family members, Fiji National University and Ministry of Health and Medical Services staff, YMCA staff and media representatives from the Fijian Broadcasting Corporation and The Fiji Times. The FBC reporter interviewed Ms Ryan and Dr Fenner and ran the story that evening. The Fiji Times printed articles in the paper. This exhibition was preceded by three days of focus group discussions with the carers meeting Dr Fenner and Brigid on Monday (June 24, 2019) while CROP members and staff met the duo on Tuesday and Wednesday respectively.

### **Benefits**

There were benefits from the program and these include:

1. Participants learning new skills
2. Opportunity for self-expression
3. Confidence building
4. Relaxation
5. Possibility of doing art therapy with other groups

An unintended result was that the carers used the sessions to share their challenges, frustrations and happy times while they worked on their pieces. They also shared food after the sessions and this became a ritual. Self-care was a recurring topic during these gatherings. Mothers, grandmothers and aunts are usually the primary carers for loved ones with mental illness. Fiji is a patriarchal society and this means that the women are also responsible for housekeeping, religious obligations, extended family functions and school activities for their children.

### **Challenges**

The project also had challenges and these were:

1. Keeping participants interested
2. Families of some consumers expecting monetary returns from the artworks
3. Managing housekeeping as in the case of participants who were always answering their phones
4. Convincing people that art therapy can help persons in recovery

Individual and group activities: There was a notable difference when participants worked individually or as a group. It seems the communal way of doing things in Fiji manifested during the project because group activities were completed quicker when everyone got involved and encouraged each other. There was some hesitation when participants were asked to do things individually. It has to be pointed out that most people are not familiar with paints, canvas or traditional art materials and this could explain the hesitation. Culture can also be a factor because people are shy to ask questions. Participants needed to be shown how to use the materials and encouraged before they picked up a brush or piece of voivoi. As time progressed and confidence built up, participants were able to work better and ask questions.

## **Participants' comments**

The following comments were made at different stages of the project:

"I love colours, life is plain without colours."

"He [God] created me to build – not destroy."

"It feels good painting."

"It's fun and my favourite colour is green because it reminds me of my team in high school."

"I was nervous because I have never painted on canvas but I felt good afterwards."

"I can laugh – it's a wonderful journey."

"When I was weaving, my head cleared."

One participant had a different view: "I'm not good at art – I prefer sports."

This is a nursing student's opinion: "We all recover from something so art is a good way to help the healing process."

## **Sustainability**

Art therapy could be used as a recovery tool for people with mental and physical health problems, stress, trauma but more people in Fiji need to be convinced that painting, drawing, writing or weaving has value. Children of parents with a mental illness could be another target group. There is potential for the expressive and performing arts to become part of art therapy provided financial and technical support is made available. There is power in both emotion and art so whoever said that "art is the highest form of hope" is a visionary.

## **Personal observations**

The project was enriching for me personally because I have not done anything like this in my 28 years as a contemporary craftsperson. I have facilitated at craft workshops previously but the art therapy program was new because of the emphasis on using art as a recovery pathway. There were challenges along the way but these were solved by consulting acquaintances and making adjustments. The Pacific sense of humour also helped to ease the tension and make things enjoyable. I came down with influenza and was sick for two weeks last year but it only steeled my resolve to finish the project. Overall it has been a humbling experience for me because I was allowed into not only a safe space, but a sacred latitude, where participants could engage without fear of judgment. I now understand how art can help a person manage their feelings and regulate emotions.

## **Acknowledgments**

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# Pictures



Jigsaw puzzle Art Therapy Workshop June 2018



Setting up paper angels



Exhibition



Rangoli (coloured dried rice) landscape

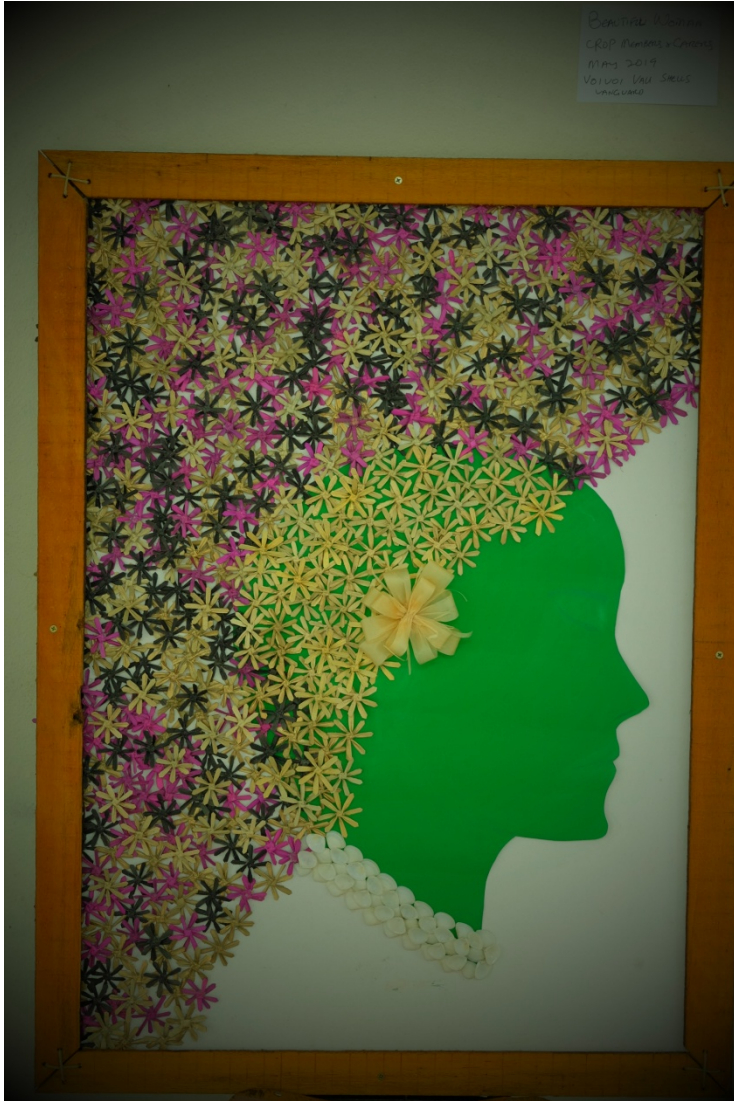


Finger painting



Creating the frieze for the launch





Beautiful Woman in voivoi (pandanas leaves) collage