

Art Pharmacy Project Offers Artistic Prescription for Loneliness

The 'social prescribing' program, led by college professors and a local artist, will use art to encourage social connection

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Creative Action Unlimited produced a film, "The Climb," in 2021. The group's founder and artistic director, Michael Kennedy, helped start Art Pharmacy, a new initiative in Rensselaer County that introduces clients battling loneliness to local creative events through a referral from their mental healthcare providers. Creative Action Unlimited

TROY — A group of college professors and a local artist have come up with a new prescription for loneliness.

They launched their project, Art Pharmacy, earlier this month, connecting people struggling with isolation to artistic activities or other types of "prescribed" social connection. Supervised by Russell Sage College professors and Michael Kennedy, founder and artistic director of Creative Action Unlimited, a theater organization based in East Greenbush that offers social justice support and opportunities, the "social

prescribing” project introduces clients battling loneliness to local artistic or creative events through a referral from their mental health care providers.

“If the healthcare provider thinks that someone would benefit from perhaps listening to music or seeing a story being told on stage, maybe a visit to an art museum ... something that would just get them out of the house and expose them to other people, stories, art, music that’s what Art Pharmacy is,” said David Baecker, a professor overseeing the program.

Art Pharmacy is a service provided by SocialRx, an Atlanta-based company founded in 2022 that offers a well-being network and community-based social connection to partners nationwide.

The group has two more Russell Sage faculty members: Alicia Harlow, chair and associate professor of psychology, and Tracy Gilbert, assistant professor of expressive arts in mental health. Together with Baecker, they are building a network of mental health providers partnered with Art Pharmacy. They also collaborate with Kennedy, a playwright with over 30 years of human services experience.

It was Kennedy’s idea to bring SocialRx’s Art Pharmacy to Rensselaer County. She applied for her theater company to be a community partner and received a grant from Russell Sage College’s Rubin Community Fellows Program, which funds programs run by academic institutions and local agencies in Rensselaer County. The three Russell Sage faculty members joined Kennedy after her community theater group was awarded the grant.

The East Greenbush-based organization is currently the only community partner, but Kennedy is working on expanding the Art Pharmacy partnership. She said as more local groups join, more events or activities will be available to clients. Some possibilities include musical events, botanical gardens, museums, art classes or writing classes, as well as her production’s shows or events, such as drum circles.

The nascent program is not quite ready to accept participants yet, Baecker told the Times Union. He said the group of experts is currently expanding its network of mental health professionals in the county who can refer their clients to the arts program. Kennedy anticipates the project will start accepting clients in about three months.

“Once we got the referral system in place, one of our goals is to do outreach to local arts organizations so they understand how to become a community partner, how to assess whether they would be able to provide the individuals who are referred with the kind of support they might need,” she said.

Participation will be free, and Art Pharmacy will cover costs of tickets for activities, according to Baecker. He said the initiative may also cover transportation costs.

Baecker said loneliness became more noticeable and pervasive on his college campus after the coronavirus pandemic. Technological developments changed the way people interacted and used various services, such as ordering food and taking classes. “You never really have to leave your place,” he noted.

But he thinks people can use art to regain connections or foster new ones through reflection and shared human experiences.

"Perhaps you are experiencing loneliness, and you go to see a piece of theater that addresses it. And as you see the characters working through the problem, it can inform the way you work on the problem yourself," Baecker said. "It can bring awareness to your problem. Sometimes art just cheers you up."

Experiencing art with other people, reacting to it together, can feel therapeutic, he said.

Kennedy agrees.

"I think the power of creativity and community is so important for people who are often marginalized in their communities," she said. "They have trouble with mobility, mental health challenges where they don't have a really good social network."