

ART FOR LIFE

WITH ART COMES HOPE

By Anthony Knutson

At first glance, the second-floor play area at the Sacramento Shriners Hospital on Art for Life's ceramics and kids day looks like a typical art studio filled with children and their families painting and having fun.

Look closer, and you'll see there's more to it than that.

You'll see that the children and their families are undergoing a unique journey of healing. And on this day, Art for Life is playing a small role in helping them through that difficult, yet remarkable process.

In the two-and-a-half years that Art for Life has worked with the Shriners, the effectiveness of art as a healing tool has been evident.

Children paint as children, not as sick patients who need a diversion. Kids paint to feel in control of their lives when so much medically is controlled for them.

Creating art is natural for kids. Art motivates them.

You can ask a child or a teen who has lost an arm to use their new prosthetic limb to pick up a pencil to write a letter or to pick up a spoon to eat a bowl of cereal, and with time and practice they will learn to do it.

But put an art project with paint and a paintbrush in front of them, and, without being asked, they intuitively reach for the paintbrush and begin to paint.

They paint with a prosthetic hand, with small knuckles that are the remainder of a hand, with both hands or even with their mouth.

It doesn't matter to them how they paint. They find a way and they do it. It's at that moment they begin to heal physically and emotionally.

Anthony Knutson is the founder and chief executive officer of Art for Life, a nonprofit organization. Since March 2006, the Therapeutic Recreation-Child Life Department at Shriners Hospitals for Children has worked in partnership with Art for Life to give patients and families an opportunity to heal through art therapy.

Patients Martha Fragoso-Illan, right, Jesus Arreola-Garcia, below, Lella Noble, below right, and Manuel Ortiz-Baeza, bottom, participate in the Art for Life program at Shriners Hospitals for Children Northern California. One afternoon each month, the hospital's central activity area, which is labeled with a patient-designed sign, bottom right, is transformed into a studio for patients, parents and families. On this particular day, each participant painted a ceramic dog figurine.

