



Working with clay teaches how to work through life's issues: A closer look with Beth McGuigan

Beth McGuigan has made a career out of using the healing power of clay to help those who have undergone traumatic experiences, from drug addiction to battling cancer. During one clay workshop for at-risk youth and their families who are served by an outreach program based in the 59th Street Baptist Church, McGuigan, a sculptress of 40 years, brought a compassion born from her personal experiences of healing from trauma through working clay.

"Clay responds sensitively to touch and retains a memory of what has been done to it. It's a medium that requires focus and patience to master. Learning how to work with a medium like clay," McGuigan explains, "teaches how to work through life's issues. My job is to show people that things can be overcome."

McGuigan started the two-hour workshop by giving each mother and child a small piece of clay and asking them to describe how it felt. Afterwards, she demonstrated some basic techniques, like rolling and pinching the clay, to help the participants get accustomed to the temperature and texture of the clay. McGuigan had everybody in the class place one hand above their head and one below their chin, pointing out that despite what one might expect, heads are egg-shaped and people's eyes are positioned just about in the middle of the head.

The main project of the workshop was creating a family portrait tile. Many of the mothers and children brought in photographs. Using a variety of tools, they worked to render the photos in clay. Those who didn't bring photographs worked from their imaginations or from each other. Not everyone adhered to the structure of the activity, however. One little girl who was building little piles of clay on the table in front of her said, beaming, that she was making a "mess garden." Others,

mothers and children alike, assumed a focus that at times left the room silent. McGuigan praised gardeners and portraitists alike for their focus and creativity.

Tabitha Black, who works with both the outreach program and Art-Reach, invited McGuigan to run the sculpture workshop. According to Black, these kinds of recreational workshops can have a great impact on mothers and their children. "It lets the women and children know that they're out here together," Black said, adding that these kinds of recreational activities have a great impact on mothers and their children and provide them with new experiences and help build a community.

This particular workshop was largely funded by a grant from the Seybert Foundation, but Beth offers reasonably priced workshops year round through Art-Reach's [In-Facility Program](#) that are discounted from her regular public rates. For more information or to book an experience with Beth McGuigan, contact Art-Reach at 215-568-2115 x4 or x5 or visit [Beth's listing](#) on the In-Facility Roster.

This February, Beth McGuigan will be a featured guest during an event for Art-Reach Liaisons called "A Day of Healing". Beth will lead liaisons through her program so they can experience it first hand. This event will be offered to Art-Reach Liaisons as a day of mental health and rejuvenation while allowing them to meet one another. Build-A-Bridge, an Art-Reach member, is the sponsor of this program. More information will be available shortly!

-By Mary Prager and Ben Rachbach