

Summer 2021 Issue

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NEWSLETTER



AMERICAN COUNSELING
ASSOCIATION *of* NEW YORK

A Branch of the American Counseling Association



**WORKING WITH
SURVIVORS OF HUMAN
TRAFFICKING THROUGH
THE ARTS**



Anne Pollock, Founder and Executive Director of CrossPoint Arts (CPArts)

Interview with Anne Pollack, Founder and Executive Director of Crossing Point Arts (CPArts), a non-profit that partners with anti-trafficking agencies in the tri-state area to bring healing to survivors through creative workshops, drawing upon the therapeutic power of the arts. Ms. Pollack's determination to train fellow Teaching Artists to work directly with trafficking survivors has sparked a shift in the conversation about creativity as a gateway therapy which provides therapeutic tools to an underserved domestic & international survivor population. Anne is a writer, activist, musician, performer, composer, producer, multi-disciplinary artist, Teaching Artist and a musical instrument restorer. Crossing Point Arts is the only nonprofit of its kind in the US.

SUMMER 2021

Facts & Figures*

*from the interview

40.3 million
ENSLAVED PEOPLE IN THE
WORLD (EST.)

64,000
"DISAPPEARED" BLACK AND
WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THE US
CURRENTLY

AS MANY AS

70%

of children in foster care are
victimized by sex traffickers

70%

of human trafficking is sex
trafficking

ACA-NY: Ms. Pollack, can you describe the journey that led to your creating Crossing Point Arts (CPArts)?

AP: I was outraged by racism before I even had words for it. I grew up in the States, but had the opportunity to work and travel abroad, in Europe, Brazil and the Caribbean, where I witnessed community healing within the African diaspora, which was very often brought to life through creative channels. In my early fifties, I decided to put together my life experiences, my artistic and activist education and created a productive way to express my growing moral indignation about the revisionist history of enslavement and the abiding racism in the US. That led me to the issue of human trafficking, which is also referred to as modern-day slavery.

CPArts is, therefore, a continuation of a life-long aspiration to interrupt something heinous that I recognized in the world.

ACA-NY: How did you decide on the right medium for your involvement?

AP: In my early twenties, I survived sexual assault, and my personal healing journey involved many years of therapy,

as well as holistic healing with acupuncture, somatic therapy, and Traditional Chinese Herbal Medicine. At the same time as I was working through posttraumatic stress, I had to deal with how society was responding to me as a survivor, a feminist, and an anti-racist who had challenged the world and spoken against injustice long before it was popular for a White person to do so. My unfolding as an artist was concurrent with that process; I am a professionally trained musician and a self-taught visual artist. I discovered along the way that creativity was the anchor for all of my healing process. My own journey showed me that through art, I had the ability to bring myself back.

ACA-NY: How did you get started, once you realized that you could show up for human trafficking survivors as an artist and an activist?

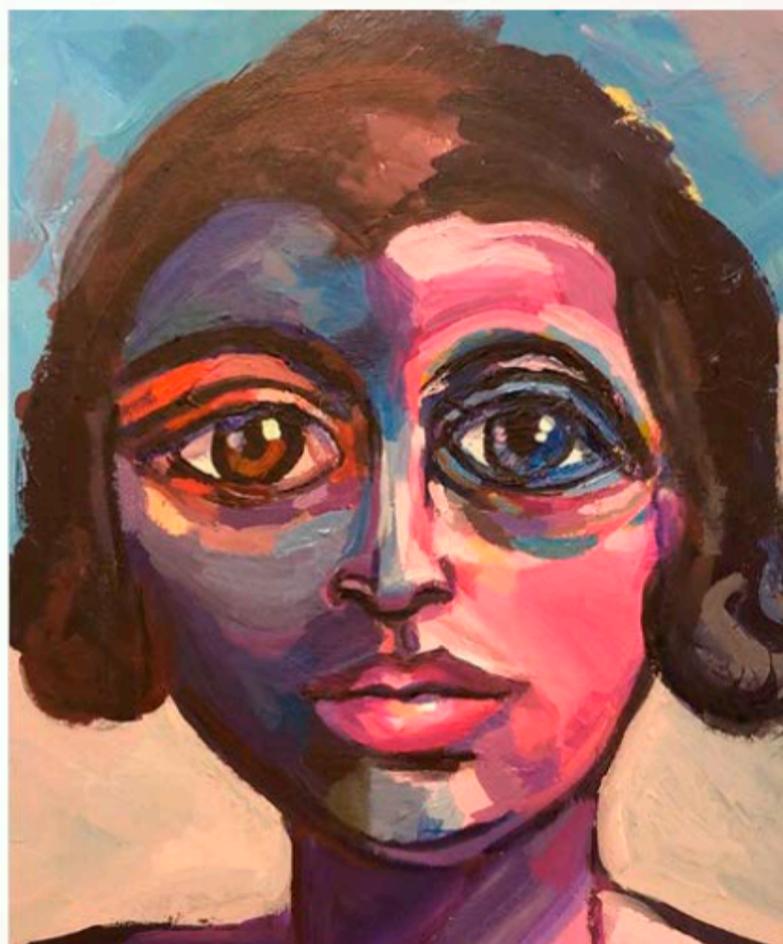
AP: In 2012, I completed a training with the Polaris Project [a DC-based non-profit fighting sex and labor trafficking]. My research revealed that, surprisingly, there were no professional arts-based/artist-led workshops for human trafficking survivors in the

States. On the other hand, the experiences from other countries, where the arts are more integrated into both the daily life and the healing process, pointed to the fact that survivors do much better when they are given space to sing, dance, create poetry & lyrics, or paint. Inspired by such programs, I developed a similar approach, and customized it to the United States.

ACA-NY: Can you share some of the facts and figures that compelled you to engage with this work?

AP: Officially, there are an estimated 40.3 million enslaved people in the world right now; I would say that the number is probably larger than that, with all the refugee and immigrant crises. People believe that this is not their problem, because they are not directly affected; I believe that they are wrong. So many products in our consumerist culture – our phones, our clothes, our furniture – are often made by slave labor. We rarely hear about the scope of the problem in the news; for example, there is hardly any mention of the fact that thousands of newly trafficked people every day.

Our unfinished reckoning with our history in the US, as well as the money and power propping up the trafficking industry are real obstacles in bringing attention to this issue.



Portrait by R.
(from Survivor Mentorship Program)

ACA-NY: How could counselors, individually and collectively, make an impact?

AP: One way is through advocacy; a national organization such as ACA could help in bringing this problem to the forefront. We need to speak up and help circumvent the psychology of avoidance that impedes the conversation about human trafficking.

ACA-NY: What do you see as the biggest misconceptions around human trafficking?

AP: A survivor once told me: “We are seen as a liability”. The stigma that surrounds this issue in America partly has its roots in the four-hundred-year revisionist history that has been so violently painful and deadly for people of color. Current day human trafficking has a direct line to the history of slavery and is likely overlooked for the same reason that systemic racism has been able to run freely. As an example, the majority of people who are ensnared by sex traffickers here are black and brown girls and women. Currently there are 64,000 ‘disappeared’ black women and girls in the US. This is not unrelated. For White people, human trafficking is thought of as a “thing that happens over there”. They ask, “Doesn’t that happen somewhere like in Thailand?.” No, it is probably happening on your own block!

ACA-NY: Who are the survivors of human trafficking?

AP: A survivor is someone who was formerly enslaved for the purpose of sexual exploitation, forced labor, organ

transplant, and peonage, child marriage and forced drug trafficking. It can happen to anybody. 70% of human trafficking is sex trafficking; most of those victims are young women. Homeless youths are extremely vulnerable, and many are trafficked within 36 hours of leaving their home. Traffickers are skilled in finding and exploiting them. Many homeless youths have already had their trust severely violated by childhood abuse. Traffickers know and pray on that; they will “boyfriend” the young person, seduce them with false promises and treats, in



Portrait by a Survivor

order to make an estimated \$250,000 per year of profit per sex trafficked individual, forcing them to service as many as 20 ‘Johns’ a day.

ACA-NY: Could you comment on the treatment of human trafficking survivors in the legal system?

AP: Until somewhat recently survivors would come through the criminal justice system, and once identified as trafficking survivors, they would be mandated through alternatives-to-incarceration programs to spend time with a social worker at any one of the anti-trafficking agencies. Eventually it was determined that this approached added new trauma to the already-traumatized survivors, and the arrests became much fewer. I have seen a huge drop in the numbers served by the agencies. Now, people are coming in voluntarily, which is great, but there is also a downside in the removal of a certain kind of protection that comes with the involvement with the system. On the other hand, trafficker/perpetrator arrest rates have not gone up.

ACA-NY: What does CPArts work look like today?

AP: Soon after establishing the concept for CPArts, I invited two colleagues, a creative arts therapist and movement specialist, and a singer who work with

sound healing and eventually got her MA in Mental Health Counseling. In the last eight years, we have worked in conjunction with practically all anti-trafficking agencies in the NYC Metro area. We establish an understanding that we are not there to provide therapy, but to do art, and, in turn, to let the art to the therapeutic work. Our workshops are offered through a trauma-informed lens, and are free for survivors either as a one-off, or as a series of workshops that can be attended as needed. A big part of our mission is to equip survivors with tools they can eventually use on their own.

ACA-NY: You have a great deal of experience working with people who have suffered trauma, grief, and loss. What have you found to be most helpful in that kind of work?

AP: The idea of creating ventral vagal state through presence of a self-regulated other, a “being with”, as



Portrait by a Survivor

described in polyvagal theory, is central to how we work. The presence of a respectful, non-intrusive teaching artist can be soothing to a traumatized individual who is trying to find a creative outlet. Through our trauma-informed approach as Teaching Artists it is crucial to keep your own curiosity in check and not the survivors about their history. If they choose to tell us about their experiences, we are supportive listeners, but direct the group's focus back to the creative work. We always come prepared with several creative backup plans, in case the client simply does not feel like doing whatever was the activity planned for that session. Presence, preparation, and flexibility are key.

ACA-NY: How does art facilitate healing?

AP: The mutual focal point between the survivor and the teaching artist, whatever the creative form is, acts as an astonishingly powerful tool, allowing survivors to enter a space that is separate from any posttraumatic stress that might be rotating inside of them. This process soothes and trains the nervous system and can be returned to

at any time. Sometimes survivors tell me "I felt so stressed and out of my head, but then I wrote this poem, and all of us sudden I felt better than I had in years". Through this process, things get loosened, people engage with their voice, either through music, dance, or maybe drawing a picture for the first time.

ACA-NY: Was there a particularly memorable experience with someone discovering their artistic self for the first time?

AP: I remember a woman who made a drawing of a tree; she was a survivor of organ trafficking. She held up her picture and exclaimed "I never did this before, but I can do this!". In that moment, she reclaimed something huge, something very powerful.

ACA-NY: What should we avoid when working with survivors?

AP: Asking unwanted questions. Digging in the past for survivors can be extremely triggering, and there is also a cultural component to consider. For example, through Womankind (one of our partner agencies) we work with a lot of Asian survivors. That is a culture

in which talking and sharing personal stories about these experiences is not common, even with social workers, and we respect that. Asking those questions can be so re-traumatizing; I continuously emphasize this in our Teaching Artist training. Also, it is important to explain the parameters of one's work, role, and the relationship that is being formed. A lack of clarity in this will quickly and powerfully erode trust.

ACA-NY: How have you handled the transition to virtual workshops during the COVID-19 pandemic?

AP: Pre-pandemic, we held in-person workshops in locations throughout New York City, Westchester, White Plains, and New Jersey, connecting with around 4,500-5,000 survivors. Like the rest of the world, we moved to Zoom a year ago; unfortunately, not all our partner agencies were able to do the same. We currently do intensive work with Covenant House New Jersey, Womankind, Lifeway Network, and iFoster; the latter is a national organization that helps kids in- and aging-out of foster care. It is important to note that as many as 70% of children



Survivor Artwork

in foster care are victimized by sex traffickers.

ACA-NY: Tell us about how you use art as a tool of self-care.

AP: *Laughs and points to a collection of framed paintings on the wall behind her, her own works of art.* I don't let a day go by without playing one of my instruments, I paint, sketch, write poetry, dance, sing... I am a devout creative.

ACA-NY: How else do you deal with vicarious trauma that can occur in work such as yours?

AP: I work with a supervisor individually, as well as take part in group supervision. Together, as Teaching Artists, we decompress, listen, and learn from each other.

ACA-NY: What is ahead for CPArts in this transitional, post-pandemic period?

AP: We are expanding our reach. While we anticipate the return of in-person programs, we are still fine-tuning our offering of online workshops, which consist of music, poetry, and spoken-word performances, painting, dance and theater games.

ACA-NY: What is your vision for CPArts in the future?

AP: My goal for us to eventually be entirely survivor-run; as a first step in that direction, we are growing our advisory board to include survivors. In the future, I would love to get to the point where all of our Teaching Artists and administrators are survivors.

ACA-NY: Thank you the important work that you are doing, and for sharing your story. Finally, do you have any last words of advice for counselors working with survivors of human trafficking, and people with trauma in general?

AP: You do not have to be an artist yourself to implement creative practices. Survivors need company, they need your presence. You can take the creative journey together with them. I am a great believer in therapy, but sometimes, keeping the art process as its own vessel can be very effective. Art is a powerful tool for regaining your center, a sense of balance, and wholeness. The co-regulation that happens during that process opens a new channel for curiosity and engagement, which is what ultimately makes our work joyous.

Find out more:

Crossing Point Arts

www.crossingpointarts.org

Polaris Project

www.polarisproject.org

Womankind

www.iamwomankind.org

iFoster

www.ifoster.org

Lifeway Network

www.lifewaynetwork.org

Covenant House

www.covenanthousenj.org



Freedom Made It Mentorship Project

Launched by Crossing Point Arts

Freedom Made It: Mentorship Project was formed to support trafficking survivors in developing their creative capacities, while simultaneously receiving ongoing business guidance and training. Mentorship format is organized for either individuals, or small groups of mentees.

To learn more, visit <https://www.crossingpointarts.org/shop-1>.