



By Laura Lynch May 30, 2020

## Nassau Museum Launches Trauma Therapy Program



Friday, March 13, started off as a typical day at the Nassau County Museum of Art in Roslyn Harbor. The staff was busy putting the final touches on our new exhibition, installing object labels alongside the works of art in our beautiful new exhibition blue. We barely had a moment to take in the stunning collection of works from all over the globe that explores how artists have taken inspiration from the color blue throughout the history of art.

Moments before we were ready to open the doors to members and VIPs for the opening celebration, we received news that the Museum had to close due to the COVID-19 virus. We quietly switched gears, retreating to our offices to pack up files, thumb drives, books and anything we would need to work from home. Outgoing messages were changed to alert people

to the closure. Descending the spiral steps from my third-floor office to leave the Frick mansion, I took one last glance into the galleries. Spaces that moments before were filled with the promise of so many rich conversations and the enthusiastic voices of thousands of children discovering these works of art for the first time, were now filled with a deafening hush. It was just the beginning of a harsh, new reality.

With the building closed, the staff sprang into action from home. Zoom meetings surrounded by dogs, kids and spouses resulted in a burst of art activities for all ages, virtual tours and guided art experiences for our website and social media platforms. We were determined to let our beloved members and public know that we had not forgotten them and were committed to fulfilling our social and cultural contracts which became more essential than ever.

But the quiet of isolation, as I watched our friends and neighbors suffer the immense physical, emotional and psychological toll of the pandemic, I wrestled with big questions: Is art still important in this crisis? What role can a museum play? What does recovery look like for our community, and how can we make a difference?

#### A Museum in the Community's Service

The Nassau Museum is mobilizing a year-long effort to provide therapeutic help and inspiration for those who have suffered trauma, anxiety and stress during the pandemic, including survivors, medical personnel and first responders, people with disabilities and their families and friends. Throughout the crisis, the Museum labored to maintain the 145-acre campus of grounds and trails, including our sculpture garden, and we even planted new native flower gardens for the future. Thousands of visitors have enjoyed, free of charge and safely distanced, the spectacular arboretum and world-class sculpture. In that same spirit, to fulfill the needs of the region hit hardest in the nation by the crisis, the Museum is committing its exhibitions and educational efforts, mobilizing the full staff as well as expert advisors, to an innovative effort to become a "trauma-aware" institution.

This means cultivating a safe space to help process the effects of the crisis. Whether out on the grounds, in our galleries, art studios, or in virtual learning engagement opportunities, we want to foster empathy, trust and openness so that visitors feel comfortable sharing their stories. In collaboration with established experts in the field of art therapy and mental healthcare, we are launching a series of programs, for people of all ages, interests, and abilities, to empower visitors through their experience of art. Our entire staff is engaged to make this vital goal of our priority in the months to come.

The Museum is well-positioned to make a difference in the recovery effort. With our many wonderful resources, including our bucolic grounds and the art in our galleries, we provide opportunities for contemplation, joy and wonder and a respite from the harsh realities of our daily lives. In more normal circumstances our day to day work is about bringing people together for social interaction in programs that using art as a tool to make connections and share ideas. Now we are finding ways to specifically address the effects of trauma. We are launching a series

of creative programs that address and support the social emotional wellbeing of families, teachers, adult learners, and people with special needs. Programs are offered in the museum (when we re-open) on the grounds of the museum and through virtual learning experiences until then. We will offer them multiple times to accommodate small groups to ensure that social distancing mandates are met. These programs include:

**Gallery Tours and Talks** – In the museum and out on our grounds, these programs invite participants to look at and discuss works of art as a means of processing their own difficult life experiences. Group discussions around works of art can help fight against the emotional impact of social isolation.

**Open Studio / Art Classes** – Hands-on art-making gives visitors the opportunity to make visible their experiences in both open-ended studio experiences and in scheduled art classes that explore a variety of artistic media and inspiration. These programs will provide the support and resources for participants to work through self-guided and class directed creative responses.

**Open-Air Painting** – The act of putting brush to paper is a meditative and soothing experience. Making art on the grounds of our museum will engage participants in an exploration of line, form, and color. Out in nature and using the power of art as a non-verbal mode of communication to explore and express emotions.

**Mindfulness** – Inspired by staff training in mindfulness that we took at the Rubin Museum in Manhattan, I have joined my colleagues in our education department to design guided mindfulness meditations that focus on observation and reflection as we gather together for a walk through the Museum's sculpture park and garden. Participants will unplug and unwind, using our grounds and sculpture to focus on our breathing, notice our reactions, and practice the art of looking on purpose without judgment.

**Yoga Outdoors**– Bird songs, the touch of a gentle breeze and the smell of cut grass and blooms will help people activate their senses in the serene setting of our garden as they use breathing and movement to alleviate stress.

**Resources for Students and Teachers** – Offered online and designed to provide teachers with teaching resources, this series of lessons bring the museum into the classroom. Lessons will focus on interdisciplinary lessons that look at art through the lens of social studies, science, and literature. Education staff are assembling a panel of teachers and administrators to discuss and collaborate on developing classroom curricula for virtual learning experiences and activities that teachers can use for themselves and their students to address the social-emotional stresses that impact their personal health and educational goals.

**Engaging People on the Spectrum** – Through a series of interactive videos that engage participants in art-making, interactive storytelling and movement activities NCMA's Art Therapist will engage people on the Autism Spectrum and provide a vital resource for family

and care partners who are navigating the challenges of adapting home instruction for their child.

Drawing Lessons- Drawing videos engage people of all ages in drawing prompts that encourage participants to look closely at recording what you see. Everyone is encouraged to join in with no focus on making a perfect work of art. We also acknowledge that people might not have access to art supplies, so they are encouraged to use what they have at home.

Virtual Gallery Tour and Exhibition Guide – These resources invite people to explore the museum virtually and offers an in depth look at the museum’s current exhibition blue. to help build a deeper understanding of the artists, their process, and their work.

### Building On Our Track Record

The Museum and its professional staff have considerable experience in the fields of disability and art therapy. For more than a decade, we have hosted programs for people on the Autism Spectrum as well as people with Alzheimer’s and for groups from local organizations, for whom a visit to the Museum has been a welcome break in their daily routines. Among the founders of the museum three decades ago, Joan Saltzman was famous for her support of people with disabilities, and her legacy of compassion continues in the building that bears her name. Our director Charles Riley has been a nationally known advocate for people with disabilities in the political and business spheres, including those with PTSD. He is the author of two books on the subject, and the recipient of honors from the White House, the Mayor of New York’s Office for People with Disabilities, Easter Seals, and the National Alliance on Mental Illness. We are working with two extremely talented and experienced experts in the field of art therapy, Pam Koehler, Molly Bassett and Deborah Adler.

Coming out on the other side of this, whatever that looks like, the Museum is here to help. Until then, we will continue to open our grounds (and the galleries, virtually) as we await the time when we can meet again.



Laura Lynch is the director of education at the Nassau County Museum of Art. Throughout her 20-year career in the field she has been a staunch advocate for accessibility, diversity and inclusivity through her work with people with physical and intellectual disabilities and for children and families from under-resourced communities. She was awarded the President’s Office on Arts and Humanities Coming Up Taller Award. In partnership with social service organizations across Long Island, Lynch has created community-responsive programs with AHRC, North Shore Autism Circle, Autism Speaks, and Adults and Children with Learning and Developmental Disabilities.

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