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■ Creativity sheds old habits, builds bridges Lifeline through art

By Megan Gorrey

"MEL, can you please write on this box for me? I want it to say my boys' names and then 'Love, your Daddy!'"

For recovering drug and alcohol addicts at Odyssey House, art lessons offer more than a chance to pick up a paint brush and put some colour on a page.

They're an opportunity to rebuild shattered self-esteem, clear the mind and, in some cases, start to patch up family relationships which cracked under the weight of their addictions.

Campbelltown visual arts teacher Melissa Cranfield has taught drawing, design, painting and printing to residents in the early stages of their rehabilitation at Odyssey House for more than 20 years.

When she first arrived at the Minto centre to run a screen-printing program, the art department was an empty shed filled with cobwebs.

It has since been transformed into a busy hive of

creativity and healing where residents can learn skills in woodwork, painting and sculpture as part of their treatment.

"The goal is to stimulate them, have them work in a really positive environment learning some basic skills and completing projects at a confidence-building standard," Ms Cranfield said. "Our main goal is to have them learning something new, expressing themselves and completing things."

Ms Cranfield said art was therapeutic and often unlocked feelings and emotions which residents had kept inside for years.

"When people are working with their hands they tend to relax and talk about things," she said. "I've seen it be powerful."

"We've had people with very serious mental health issues or very low levels of education where they're virtually illiterate, and they've found it is an easy way for them to

express their feelings.

"For a lot of the people who come in here they're straight for the first time, they've done a lot of family damage and it helps create a bridge — they can say 'I've made this for you'.

"It's an olive branch to say 'I'll stay here and get sober."

"Aside from all the therapeutic aspects it distracts and relaxes as well, it's a bit of a mental break.

"And we've used it as a tool for anger and grief management — because it's non-verbal it's less threatening."

Ms Cranfield has also worked as a counsellor for the organisation and said she had stayed so long because she "hadn't had a chance to get bored here yet".

"It's compelling," she said. "It's powerful seeing people come in very damaged, very broken and see them come out the other end the person they were meant to be."



Artful recovery: Melissa Cranfield enjoys the challenge of helping residents, like Jason, in the early stages of their rehabilitation from drug and alcohol addiction. **Picture:** Jonathan Ng