

An interview with one of Australia's pioneer art therapists, Beth Stone

Jo Kelly

On a cold, wintry day in Sydney, I met with Beth Stone, one of the pioneers of art therapy in Australia. Beth is a longstanding and experienced art therapist, psychologist and author, and also a mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. In her warm house, surrounded by her artwork and sculptures, I interviewed her for the Journal, while helping myself to thoughtfully provided hot tea and scones.



Jo Kelly: *I know you have a vast amount of experience, and have been involved with the therapeutic community in Australia for many decades. Tell me, how did you come to be an art therapist?*

Beth Stone: I was the first art therapist at Macquarie Hospital, which was then North Ryde Psychiatric Centre. The story behind that position is that the acting superintendent of North Ryde Psychiatric had seen art therapy carried out at the Tavistock in London, where he worked for a while. When back in Sydney and at North Ryde, he placed an advertisement in the paper for an art therapist.

When I started working there, there was a male nurse facilitating what they called an art group. He would pick up each person's drawing and he would be up on the stage with the drawings and he would say, "I know what this means, I've read your file, this means such and such".

JK: *Oh no.*

BS: I went to Dr Maurice Sainsbury who had hired me and I said, "I can't stay. I'd love to, but I can't stay because this nurse is unethical and what he's doing to the patients is damaging. The patients won't believe anybody holds confidentiality here". So he said, "Only one of you will run the group and that will be you". And that was that!

JK: *When was that?*

BS: 1971, I think.

JK: *Would you have been the first art therapist in this country under that title?*

BS: That I know of, yes, I think so. I was certainly the first one in New South Wales and I don't think there were any others. The Jungian Society had some people they said did art, but there was no official job. That was the first job and it still stands.

JK: *I read that in your résumé.*

BS: I was here with two babies, who were then in preschool, and I thought, this would be a great thing, but I'm not an art therapist, but I'll see and go to the interview. I've done a lot of psychology and a lot of art. I was always trying to figure out who I wanted to be: the psychologist or the art therapist. So I put it together. I went for the interview with Dr Sainsbury and a person from the Department of Health. The other applicants were from the Royal College of Physicians, London, and the like and I thought, I don't have a prayer here. Then they took the Sandos pictures – copies of psychiatric patients' artwork with diverse diagnoses – and they showed me all these pictures – I have them now, but at that time I didn't have them. The interview panel asked me what I thought they meant. I did a bit of an internal roleplay and started interpreting, which I would never do now! I started doing this interpreting which I would never do and that, apparently, sold it.

(Both laugh)

JK: *So you got the job!*

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