Grieving Children and Environment: Creating a Mural for Ele's Place

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Grieving Children and Environment: Creating a Mural for Ele's Place

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Keywords

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Abstract

For my thesis project I will help a local non-profit grieving center for children transform their space with murals. By researching color and imagery and how they affect children in stressful situations, informed decisions can be made on what designs would be the most beneficial in creating a safe and calm environment for children who are grieving family members. Ele's Place, located in Burton and serving the wider Flint community, is a branch of the state-wide non-profit which offers group counseling and resources for grieving families. The Flint location opened in 2015 and is renting an old school building from a church. Because of the temporary, repurposed location there are unique challenges for this branch including investing time in art that can be moved after the lease ends, and the need to cover lockers. When working with the managing director, Amy Krug, furniture and other art that have already been donated to the organization will also influence the design choices. By working with Ele's Place, researching an environment's effects on children, seeking in-kind donations, and utilizing my fine-arts education, I will help Ele's Place create a more welcoming and peaceful environment for families undergoing a stressful time of grieving and healing.

Introduction

Counselors and healthcare providers are becoming increasingly sensitive to the role their environments play in the healing of their patients. With advances in studies on color, furniture, accessories, and lighting and how they affect the people in the environment, professionals in these fields can improve their patients' experiences. By researching color and imagery and how they affect children in stressful situations, informed decisions can be made on what designs would be the most beneficial in creating a safe and calm environment for children who are grieving family members. Ele's Place, located in Burton and serving the wider Flint community, is a branch of the state-wide non-profit which offers group counseling and resources for grieving families. The Flint location opened in 2015 and is renting an old school building from a church. Because of the temporary, repurposed location there are unique challenges for this branch including investing time in an artwork that can be moved after the lease ends, and the need to cover lockers. Designers, artists, and art administrators can work with organizations like Ele's Place to improve their environment and participants' experiences by informing their decisions with strategic research. By working together, these groups can create a more welcoming and peaceful environment for families undergoing a stressful time of grieving and healing.

In the latter half of the 20th century and in the 21st-century attention to children's psychiatric needs has been increasing and diversifying. Resources like the National Alliance for Grieving Children and the Michigan Network for Grieving Children not only help to raise awareness of the presence of children's' bereavement but also direct families to local resources and host symposiums and webinars, and information about grants for counselors. The National Alliance for Grieving Children was established as a non-profit in 2005. As of January of 2017, the NAGC has a map of the United States that links families to over 750 children's bereavement centers, groups, and programs within larger organizations organized by state. While the lists of links on the web page are far from complete, it demonstrates the widespread use of children's bereavement care and the different forms it takes in America. Each state has at least one resource listed on the NAGC website, and there is even a digital resource that encourages families to read and watch materials online from anywhere in the world and at any time of day

(albeit from a paid service). California boasts the most resources on the site, including 86 links for families, while Michigan lists Ele's Place (each location) among their list of 54.[1]

Many programs have grown out of hospice care facilities, like Camp Nabi, a bereavement camp that opened in 1992 as a part of the Chesapeake Life Center in Maryland.[2] Other bereavement centers, like Ele's Place, have been started by families who have lost children and have felt the need of children's bereavement services firsthand.

Because of the diversity and growing popularity in children's bereavement care, research, donations and the participation of skilled members of the community (psychologists, designers, childcare employees, etc.) are needed to support these organizations.

1 National Alliance for Grieving Children. https://childrengrieve.org
2 Chesapeake Life Center. http://www.chesapeakelifecenter.org/

Chapter 1: Art and Environment in Counseling

When considering how environment plays a role in peoples' experiences researchers look at color, artwork, furniture, lighting, smell, sound, texture and even the distance between the people interacting. There is limited research done on the effect of counseling environments. Research is more plentiful on classroom, office, and hospital environments, but these studies, in addition to research done specifically on counseling spaces, can inform decision-making in non-profits like Ele's Place.

While reviewing past research on counseling environments, Page K. Pressly and Martin Heesacker noted that past studies may not have been as fruitful as hoped because of the model of research. The scientist-practitioner model had counselors assessing the relationship, attitudes, and outcomes of the clients, instead of a third party. The model allowed counselors to focus on their own interaction with the client that in turn led to a "fundamental attribution error" meaning that environmental factors related to counseling practices were largely ignored compared to personal factors. Further research has been done on specific areas in counseling environments, such as common rooms in psychiatric facilities. But research on other counseling spaces is largely incomplete; there is little research done specifically on the environmental impact of private counseling rooms, peer-groups sessions that take place in churches or community centers, or grieving centers designed for children.[3]

Studies in hospitals and counseling environments

When examining an environment's impact on a person researchers place the environment into categories, including accessories, color, furniture, and room design. While they all contribute to the 'personality of the room' and therefore impact the individuals in it, I will be focusing on accessories and color (areas I can help improve at Ele's Place with this project). The room design and furniture elements encompass details including ceiling height and whether or not a chair has armrests.[4] Light, smell, and sound are also considered in countless studies.

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[3] Page K. Pressly, and Martin Heesacker. 2001. "The physical environment and counseling: A review of theory and research." *Journal of Counseling & Development* 79 (2): 148-60. Pg. 149

[4] Armrests may seem like a trivial detail, but it affects a person's relationships with space and other people. The arm of the furniture creates a physical boundary around a person that can create a feeling of

These factors influence social interactions, interpersonal distance, sense of space, and movement but are already established at Ele's Place.

Artwork is considered an "accessory" in the environment a psychologist studies. Accessories can help make both the counselor and client more comfortable in the space. Things like plants, photos, and artwork can help the counselor or counselors feel more confident and positive while working. They also give clients visual stimulus that can affect mood and inspire thought. Studies in the early 1980s examined inpatient preferences for hospital room artwork. The subjects were from a variety of backgrounds and had different ages and illness, yet the overwhelming majority of subjects preferred pictures of nature depicted with complex textures. Pictures of people, buildings, and abstract designs scored less favorably. More than one patient remarked that they "did not want to look at art that they had difficulty understanding."[5] For these hospital patients, it was understood by researchers that inpatient-participants preferred artwork that provided escapism from the hospital environment and the pain they were experiencing there.

Nature in the form of plants has been seen to have positive effects when present in the counseling space. Researchers note that when working with terminally ill children or elderly clients plants are a calming sight that symbolizes life, growth, and renewal.[6] Other examples of accessories include decorative items like rugs, posters, and cushions, although they may be categorized as room design elements by some researchers. In a study on college classrooms, the presence of these accessories creates a positive perception from students. The teachers in these classrooms were also rated more positively when compared to those from classroom environments with no adornments.[7]

Color

The effect of color on people has been more widely researched, particularly after a surge of interest in color theory in the 1970s and 80s. Psychologists consider the hue, value, and intensity or saturation of the color when doing color studies on everything from adults favorite

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personal space, safety or separation. Movable chairs can also provide a sense of control for clients, as they can change the distant between them and other people. Pressly, pg. 151-153.

[5] Pressly, pg. 150

[6] Pressly, pg. 150

[7] Pressly, pg. 151

colors, the level of distraction colored walls cause in offices, the effect of color on prisoners and customers, to what emotions people of all ages associate colors with. Earlier conclusions on the impact of color on people resulted from accidental observations and experiments. For example, in the 1920s many psychiatric facilities avoided have any presences of red in the wards because of the belief it provoked madness. But a group of employees found that after the patients were introduced to red string they became more animated, worked longer and more productively, and demanded more red items.[8] Since the 1920s, the interest in the impact of color has dramatically grown and has been researched in more structured environments. In the latter half of the 20th century, psychologists follow modern practices that provide control groups, and statistics.

And yet color theory is still at times abstract and complex. Similar studies may yield different results when the subjects are different genders, ages, are in different circumstances or from different cultural backgrounds. In 1993, Frank Mahnke, an industry color consultant, explained that with all the present research he believed it was "safe to conclude and suggest that color variety is psychologically most beneficial." He continued "It is not just that one color is better than another for a specific purpose…but a variety of visual stimulation and change in atmosphere is required in establishing a sound milieu."[9] Many researchers agree with Mahnke, that a balance should be sought to create the ideal environment, but in the last twenty years knowledge in the field has increased and it cannot be denied that strong patterns have emerged.

Many psychologists prefer working with clients in environments with light neutral colors. A study on the design of psychologists' workspaces found that counselors avoid using reds and oranges in their spaces, associating the colors with anxiety and distraction.[10] These decisions can be related to dozens of color studies in recent decades. A study by Boyatzis and Varghese in 1994 found that children relate lighter shades of colors to more positive emotions, while darker shades are related to negative emotions. Two years after, Hemphill repeated aspects from the studies with young adults and found similar results. Brighter colors related to positive responses

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[8] This study was done by Marguerite Emery, a chief occupational therapist in New York City, in 1929 and reexamined by Lukins and Sherman in 1941. Withrow, pg. 36

[9] Withrow, pg. 35

[10] Nicholas J. Watkins and Kathryn H. Anthony. "The Design of Psychologists' Offices- A qualitative Evaluation of Environment-Function Fit." The American Institute of Architects. 2004. Pg. 8, 10.

while darker colors related to negative. Hemphill also found that regardless of gender, people largely choose blue as a favorite, green as a second and red third.[11]

More complex color studies from the 1980s and 90s have also established what physiological responses result from colors in our environments. Blues and violets can decrease blood pressure and pulse rate, while red and orange increase them. Green-yellows, blue-greens are arousing while blue-violet correlated with feelings of fatigue.[12] To examine the application of color in an environment, researchers in 1999 investigated the impact of colors on walls, or select walls with preschool groups. Variation in wall color correlated with more cooperative behavior with the young children. In an early study, children exhibited better moods when placed in a pink room than one with blue walls.[13]

The color red has been examined in several studies that do not suggest it should be predominately present in certain locations. For example, in 1998 a study found that men at correctional facilities with red walls demonstrated more violent outbursts than those in facilities with yellow walls.[14] In other studies psychologists have found correlations with the color red and failure and avoidance. Subjects in a 2007 study answered fewer questions correctly when exposed to red than when exposed to green and asked the same questions. Researchers also tested 'avoidance' behavior with the color red by placed sensors on the body. Subjects were found to lean away from red test booklets significantly more than when presented green or gray booklets. Subjects were also found to avoid knocking on the office door where they were directed to after being presented red materials than green or gray. The researchers in these later studies argue that the color red is tied to primal instincts of avoidance and are associated with failure.[15]

There is further evidence that color is tied to the human experience by examining the use of color by patients in art therapy. Our relationship with color is subconscious and can be reflected when asked to make art. In the 1970s, Harriet Wadeson found that patients with depression used significantly less color in the art than patients without depression. Later studies found that children in life-threatening circumstances had a strong preference for using red and

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[11] Pressly, pg. 151
[12] Pressly, pg. 151
[13] Pressly, pg. 151
[14] Withrow, pg. 36.
[15] Andrew J. Elliot, and Markus A. Maier. "Color and Psychological Functioning." *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 16, no. 5 (2007): 250-54. Pg. 252

black in their artwork (a study on children with leukemia was completed in 1985, and a study on earthquake victims was done in 1996).[16]

In 2014, researchers in China decided to approach patients to determine the optimal color for counseling rooms. A total of seventy-five patients, placed in two groups, were surveyed on specific colors and how they perceived them. This is an important difference when compared to other color studies. Instead of observing behavior or asking simply what color people preferred, the researchers specifically asked patients to relate to adjectives. Participants were asked if the colors were pleasant/unpleasant, interesting/uninteresting, exciting/boring, relaxing/distressing, safe/fearful, and active/inactive. Ranks were assigned numerical values; the pleasant attribute was represented by 1 (very) and 2 (fairly) while 3 was neutral and 4 (fairly) and 5 (very) were represented by the negative attribute (fig. 1).[17]

	Very	Fairly	Neutral	Fairly	Very	
Pleasant	1	2	3	4	5	Unpleasant
Interesting	1	2	3	4	5	Uninteresting
Exciting	1	2	3	4	5	Boring
Relaxing	1	2	3	4	5	Distressing
Safe	1	2	3	4	5	Fearful
Active	1	2	3	4	5	Inactive

Figure 1: This ranking scale was used during the Optimal Color Design study in China in 2014.

In the first experiment, forty-two patients were presented twenty-seven color samples of different lightness and hue (fig. 2). Compiling the forty-two results for each color and category, color sample 24, a light shade of blue, was ranked most positively considering the combination of all attributes. Given this information, researchers compiled a new set of color samples. Fifteen colors were carefully selected for the second part of the study, relating to the color sample 24 (fig. 3).

[16] Withrow, pg. 35

[17] Wenjuan Liu, Jianlin Ji, Hua Chen, and Chenyu Ye. "Optimal color design of psychological counseling room by design of experiments and response surface methodology." *PloS one* 9, no. 3 (2014).

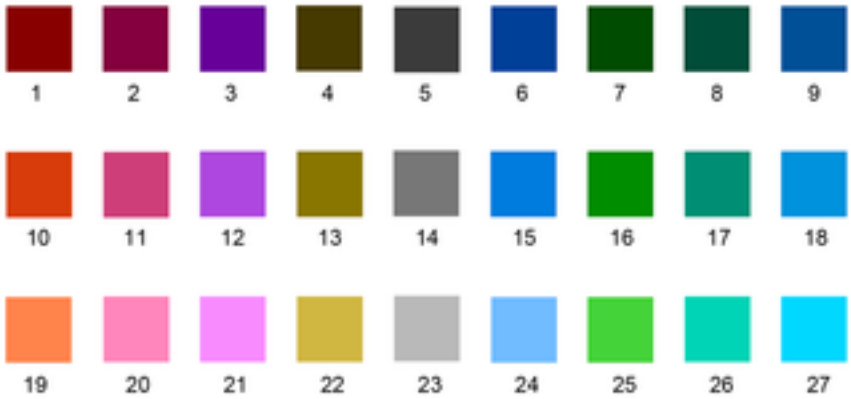

Figure 2: These 27 color samples were presented to 42 patients and ranked according to the table in figure 1. Results for most positively ranked colors are as follows: 19-most pleasant, 20-interesting, 20-exciting, 24-relaxing, 24-safe, and 21-active. Considering the combination of all six attributes, 24 was chosen as optimal.

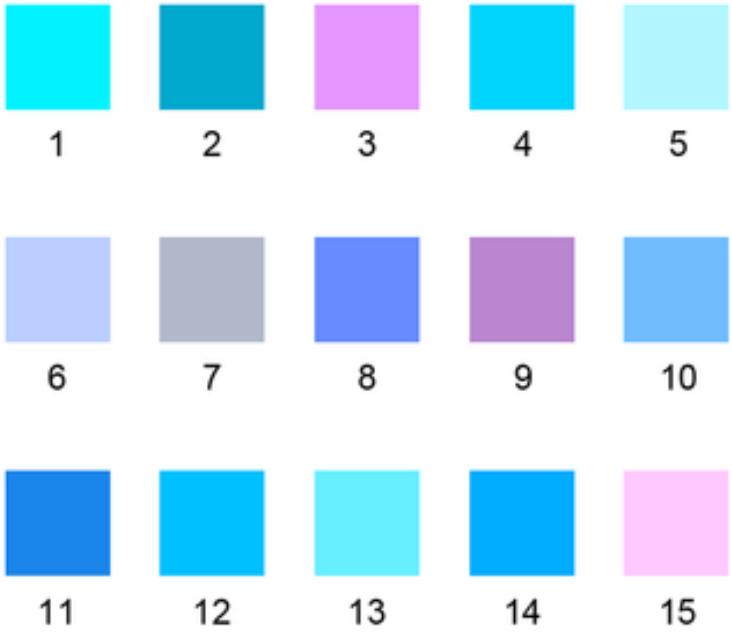

Figure 3: For the second portion of the experiment, researchers used the results from the first group to inform their decision on the new colors to present. A new group of 33 participates were presented these 15 colors and given the same ranking assignment as the first group.

The new group of thirty-three participates was giving the same ranking table as the first group and asked to perform the same task. The best-ranking color in terms of all six positive

attributes was a bright shade of blue (color sample 12) as seen in figure 4.[18] This result relates well to other color studies. The short-wavelength shades of blue were considered "safe", "relaxing", and "pleasant" in this Chinese study just as other shades of blue have been found to be preferred in other international studies; this suggests that having blue as a preference is instinctual instead of cultural. Shades of blue have been shown to be preferred by all ages and associated with decreased physiological functions, which are also present when a person is calm.

Figure 4: The color above was chosen by the second group as the best color considering the combination of all six categories.

Although the correlations between thought and color are still being researched, researchers advise counselors to consider the ages of their clientele but can use this research as a started point when considering the design of their spaces. Lighter shades are associated with positive attitudes for all ages, and while blues are a favorite and a calming color. Colors with a longer wavelength, like red, stimulate the nervous system more than shorter wavelengths (blues and greens).[19] With this information and the complexity of color theory in therapy, however, a balance should still be strived for.

Relevant Examples

There are many examples of hospitals and counseling environments that demonstrate the ideal design choices made by these phycology studies. In St. Joseph, Michigan a peer grief

[18] Liu
[19] Withrow, pg. 36

counseling center for children called Lory's Place has consistent decorations throughout their building (figures 5, 6, and 7). As an homage to their lakeside location, the center has a beach theme. The murals on the wall depict a light blue lake and sandy beaches complete with chairs, flip-flops, and an abandoned sandcastle. Seagulls fly in front of fluffy clouds and on the beach is a distant lighthouse and patches of grass grow through the sand. The lakeside theme is present in every room and is even represented with life preservers, a sail-like ceiling decoration, and smaller versions of the beach chairs that are depicted in the paintings.

Whether these design choices were done intuitively or were complimented by research, the center follows the recommendations of environment studies. The murals are rich in texture and lack people as recommended by several studies that examine a variety of ages and illnesses.[20] The colors in the décor are primarily light values that are associated with positive feelings by young people as evidenced by a study of children's emotional associations with colors. The center has "accessorizes" in the rooms including plants, pictures, child-made artwork and a variety of furniture that has been associated with making both clients and counselors more comfortable in the space.

Figure 5: Pictures on the Lory's Place website show a part of the elaborate beach-themed mural that decorates the counseling space.

[20] Studies by J.H. Baron and Greene, as well as another by Charpman and Grant each examined inpatient subjects in 1984. Baron, working with the British healthcare system, urged hospitals in the 1980s to improve their looks, publishing articles on "how to beautify" their spaces and fund the costs.

Figures 6, 7: Other images from the website demonstrate their choice of decoration for their children's grieving center. The center's designs uses many elements that test well with researchers, including the nature theme, the color blue, light shades of other colors, and both real and painted plants.

Other grieving centers do not have as consistent of a theme, nor do they exhibit the suggestions made by psychologists. Examining photos of children's centers throughout the United States, a wide variety of colors, furniture, and subject matter in pictures can be seen.

For example, Peter's Place in Radnor, Pennsylvania has a room for younger children with one dark purple wall, and another room with bright yellow walls. Peter's Place also has several Ikea leaf canopies designed to filter fluorescent light, checkered floors, brightly colored pillows and rugs, and mismatched artwork (figures 8, and 9). In a small square nook, there are pale sea green walls, pictures of nature, an oar hanging on the wall, and beanbag chairs that are pushed against the wall.

Figures 8, 9: Images from the Peter's Place children's center in Pennsylvania show the use of bright colors and accessories.

Erin's House for Grieving Children in For Wayne, IN has white hallways and checked floors with giant crayons on one wall, and a pitch-black mural with space ships and aliens on another. The hallway leads into other rooms that have different themes, including space and animals, and one room with a bright red wall.

How counselors choose to design its building is unique to each center and can depend on the many challenges they face as previously discussed. The decisions may also be a result of the assumptions many Americans have about the preferences of children. Toys and clothing for children are bright, playful and feature cartoon characters. But is this appropriate for children attending counseling? It is easy to imagine a child smiling up at the one-eyed alien in the hallway of Erin's House, an area of the building that primarily an "institutional white." But research suggests that the large black background will impact the child negatively on a subconscious level. While researchers are still expanding their studies on this type of subconscious influence, nonprofits in this field should be considerate of the potential downsides of their design choices.

What research has yet to be done

Researchers have yet to fully investigate the long-term benefits of grief counseling for children, nor the effects of environments where it takes place, whether it be individual therapy or in a group of peers. The studies that have been completed on environmental impact have not been focused on children's counseling locations, but rather for offices, classrooms, hospitals, as well as in psychiatric facilities and services for adults. These studies also vary in time span and methods (e.g. some studies test the effects of a large colored wall while others test small squares of color). For this reason, I would again like to emphasize that a combination of research from both psychology and art that may not directly relate to children's grieving centers will be pieced together to help inform my work with Ele's Place. While the importance of art and design in our everyday lives cannot be dismissed, I hope that projects like my own will contribute to the desire to research and understand design's impact on children's counseling environment to a greater extent.

Facing the death loved ones is a timeless human experience, but the way families with children are coping with death is changing. The number of counseling services available in the Western world is unprecedented and benefiting from the research in psychology. If communities embrace this and future research, artists and designers can work with counselors to provide a more meaningful and successful experience for children.

Chapter 2: Ele's Place

Ele's Place is a Michigan-based non-profit organization that was founded in 1991 to help children and their families who lost loved ones. The organization was named in honor of Ele Stover, who died at 11 months old and was survived by four siblings. Ele's Place recognizes that death can touch families in many ways and uses peer support group programs for children and provides resources for adult family members. Originally founded in East Lansing, the organization now has four Michigan locations, each striving to help grieving families with different challenges.[21]

Ele's Place uses group programs (organizing children into age groups) to help children express themselves and meet children facing similar challenges. The staff at both the Flint location and the East Lansing location, which I was fortunate enough to tour, explained to me that once a week the group will meet. The main portion of the program will be held a room dedicated to a specific age group and directed by a trained volunteer. The children will also be given a break to either spend in the "Quiet Activity" room or the "Loud Activity" room. The Quiet Activity room is a place the kids can draw or read, while the Loud Activity room has a foosball table and punching bag at the Flint Location, and a temporary wardrobe of costumes at the East Lansing location. Otherwise, the groups are primarily kept in the room dedicated to their age group, where their sessions consist of long talks, thoughtful art projects, and reflection.

Ele's Place: East Lansing

I have only toured two of Ele's Place's four locations, but the differences between the environments illuminate the different challenges the buildings provide, and the different experiences the families receive there. The East Lansing building is older, established and a prime example of thoughtful colorful choices and home-like accessories. Oppositely, the Flint location is a rental space that opened its doors in 2016 that is currently transforming into a counseling space.

Arriving at my tour of Lansing's Ele's Place, the outside of the building reminded me of a modern dentist office. Once inside, I sat in a white waiting room with a table full of colorful

[21] Ele's Place, http://www.elesplace.org/about-us

Beanie Babies in front of me. Once my tour guide arrived, I explored the main rooms and hallways the families who attend the East Lansing campus spend their time in. The walls are pale yellow with a clean white trim and small paintings dot either side of the hallway in a consistent rhythm. There are cross-stitched signs on the doors labeling what age group belongs there (made by a volunteer I'm told) and a giant stuffed teddy bear in the corner of intersecting hallways. On the far side of the building, there is a large tile floored room with high ceilings. It is attached to a kitchen and has a fireplace. There were a few volunteers installing a life-size tree sculpture in one corner of the room (fig. 10). In Lansing, this room is where all the families gather for a pot-luck style dinner before breaking off into their peer groups.

Figures 10: A social media post by Lansing's Ele's Place shows the volunteers' completed tree installation.

With the exception of a few children's artwork, all of the paintings in the main part of the building are by Nancy S. Drew. I was unable to find out more about the relationship between the artist and Ele's Place, but at least two of the paintings was created specifically for the non-profit. Above the fireplace hangs the largest painting of a small crowd of people. The style is consistent with all of the other paintings; a white background, and innocent, stylized figures with pink circles for cheeks and patterned clothes. This painting, however, says in black child-like all

capitals writing “Welcome to Ele’s Place…Where you are safe and free to be!!!” (fig. 11). Another painting, says “Every new dawn…we embrace your heart with love and courage!! Ele’s Place!!” and is surrounded by a stylized frame painted directly on the wall (fig. 12).

Figures 11 (Left), 12: The image to the left is placed above the fireplace in the banquet room and is painted by Nancy S. Drew. The artist painted a series of paintings for Ele’s Place in 2003, including the painting below.

Going into some of the many rooms bring more diversity, like the Loud Activity Room that has a roller coaster mural (fig. 13). Downstairs, the teen room has hubcap art, brighter colors, and a wide chalkboard where the teens can write whatever they wish (fig. 14). There is also a wooden fence mounted to the wall with graffiti decoration. This fence is used for

programming, and when I visited it had written notes from teens in the program about their thoughts and feelings. Considering these rooms in regards to color studies the warm, bright yellows and reds are appropriate for these rooms as the long-wave colors are associated with energizing activities and increased physiological functions.

Figure 13: The East Lansing's 'Loud Activity Room' for the younger children. On the walls there are several phrases including "How you ever felt upside down?" and "Are you up or down today?"

Figure 14: The East Lansing location's basement is dedicated to teenagers in their grieving programs. On the opposite side of the room is a bright yellow wall with a wide chalkboard.

This environment is friendly and welcoming. With the exception of the waiting room, the building does not feel like a doctor's office of any sort. Walking through the halls a one-time visitor gets a mixed impression of an elementary school and a friend's house.

Ele's Place: Flint

Ele's Place in Flint has a different feeling. It has not benefited from a long-standing place in the community, a building that it owns, or time to enhance the space. The Flint campus is less than a year old and is in a rented former school building that is owned by a local church. A sign on the backside of the building notifies guests that they have arrived. Families then march up a stairwell and enter a burnt yellow and red tiled hallway (fig. 15 and 16). In its first year in Flint, Ele's Place has made efforts to make the location feel less like a school. Donations by Ikea allowed Director Amy Krug, staff and volunteers to transform the Teen Room from a classroom to a hangout, complete with green bean bag chairs and a zebra print rug. The room for early elementary children has stuffed animals and a Winnie-the-pooh cardboard cut out.

Figures 15 and 16: Flint's Ele's Place is placed in a single hallway on the second floor of an old school building.

Help from a variety of artists also helped mask the hallway lockers into murals. Because Ele's Place is renting, decisions had to be carefully made as to not permanently alter the building, or invest too much of their precious resources in something that would be left behind in

the case of a change of buildings. The solution was to use a vinyl banner material that allowed volunteers to work off site and have the finished product easily moved. Ele's Place purchased the banner material and provided several different volunteer artists and groups to provide "happy" murals to cover the lockers. Director Krug said the artists were given no other guidelines than to create a family friendly pleasant mural, and if they decided to include people to make sure to represent multiple cultures. The end result was different styles and subjects that hang on either side of the long hallway, spaced out according to where the lockers are placed. There are two murals by a local Grand Blanc artist that share a similar style and color scheme, but otherwise, the murals share no common theme. The mural across from the entrance features a row of graphic owls and worded flags, while a mural closer to the main office has a more realistic waterscape with hot balloons and butterflies floating in the air (fig. 17 and 18). There are also fish, sunflowers, and silhouetted cats next to a quote by Ray Lamontagne about friendship.

The donated murals serve their purpose: they disguise the lockers and brighten up the dark hallway. But as Director Krug recognizes, their temporary location still allows for strategic improvements.

Figure 17: A donated mural depicts owls and a banner filled with supportive words (e.g. hope, support, trust, friends).

Figure 18: Another donated mural hides deep red lockers.

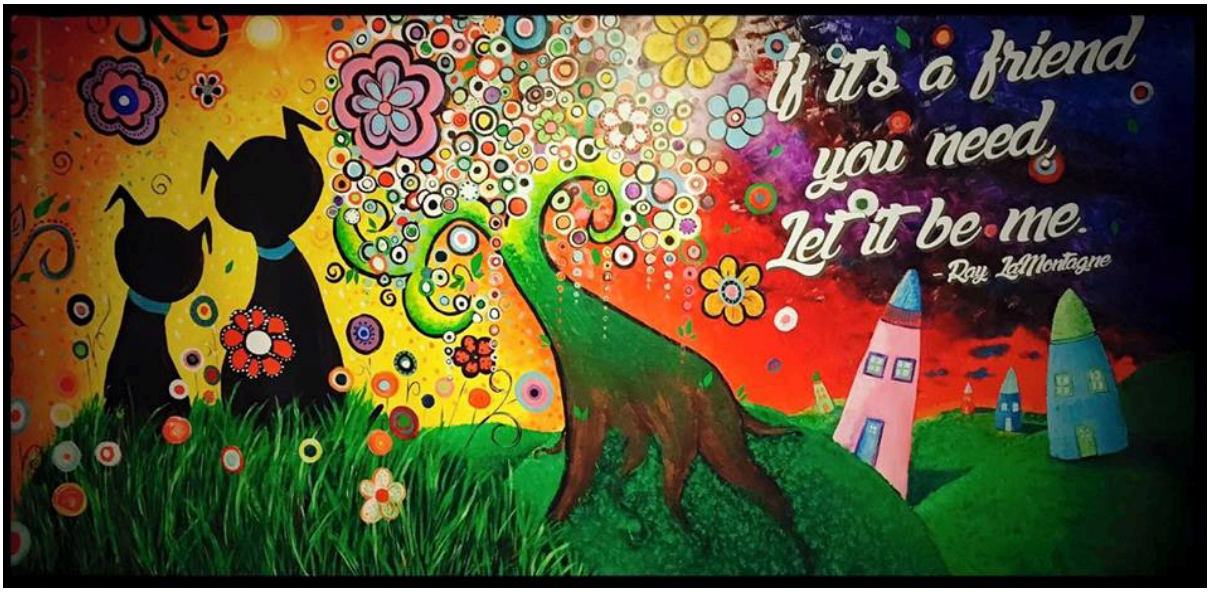

Figure 19: Above is one of several murals that hide lockers at Ele's. This mural was donated by Heather Baldwin and Eric Hendley of Seraphic Art and Graphics that is based in Flint.

Chapter 3: The Project

Originally, I had not intended to work with Ele's Place. My intention was to find a children's hospital and to develop a project or mural that would benefit children. From previous research and my own connections in the healthcare field, I knew that art in the hospital is a welcome distraction for children and can help with stress levels for people of all ages. When I approached child life specialists at Hurley's Children hospital in Flint in late fall of 2016 they were just finishing a project with an artist with grant funds that were soon to expire. Hurley is already fortunate to have many murals in their hallways and is a part of the Children's Miracle Network, which allows them to receive many donations.[22] I considered that my help could be used in an organization with greater need, and I continued to look for other medical groups that help children. Before I found another opportunity, Hurley contacted me again. The child life specialists had just toured the Flint location of Ele's Place where they talked to director Amy Krug. Krug had spoken of murals that Ele's Place would like to have and I was given their contact information.

In my first meeting with Krug, she explained to me the challenges that the new location faced while giving me a brief tour. It was then decided that I would use the same vinyl banner material as the previous artists used, a choice which would allow the mural to be easily removed and transported in case of a future building change and also allow me to finish the mural outside of building hours. Krug then recommended I tour the Lansing location before we met again.

Inspired by my tour of Lansing's Ele's Place and my continuing research, the next time Krug and I met we discussed possibly themes and locations for the mural. The ideas I presented to her were all nature scenes. By depicting nature I could conform to the optimal design choices that were discovered during psychological studies. Whether it was a beach scene or a mural with greenery and trees, my sketches all demonstrated the use of blue and green (both are preferences

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[22] In December of 2016, Hurley received an aquarium from Animal Planet's television show *Tanked* presented by the show's cast and a teen ambassador for the Children's Miracle Network and Disney star Ali Simpson. The aquarium was placed in the hospital's lobby and connects to the children's hospital's theme of "Under the Sea".
Children's Miracle Network Hospitals. "Animal Planet's *Tanked* features member CMN hospital getting new aquarium." December 16, 2016. https://newsroom.childrensmiraclenetworkhospitals.org/season-finale-animal-planets-tanked-features-member-cmn-hospital-getting-new-aquarium/

of all ages and blue is a calming yet alert short wave color, and optimal for counsel spaces). The sketches were also textured landscapes, which were preferred by hospital patients, and they each had plants that symbolize life, growth, and renewal, an accessory that tests well with children in counseling. I avoided using large amounts of the color red, people and dark colors in my designs as these elements tested more negatively with children and patients in hospitals and counseling services. Ultimately, a tree design was chosen.

Krug and I also discussed artwork that had a participatory element; murals that would allow children to attach notes or drawings to the mural. This is something that is used at the Lansing Ele's Place and Krug wanted to be at least considered for the mural. Not only do they have chalkboards and magnetic walls with word magnets, Lansing's location has a graffiti decorated fence that children add artwork to as part of their sessions. After our discussion, it was decided that a participatory element was not the main goal of the mural, but it would be convenient if there were an optional. Flint's location still had to be mindful of its relationship with the church that sometimes shares it space. Nothing in the hallways or several of the rooms could be exclusive to Ele's Place as visitors from the church use the space as well.

Although several locations were discussed, the hallway was chosen for the ideal place for the mural. The rooms for peer group counseling and loud and quiet activities had already benefited from previous donations of furniture and accessories. The hallway still resembled an abandoned, outdated school despite efforts to improve it, and is an area that all the families use when they transition and wait between sessions. One consideration was to place the mural surrounding the entrance in the stairwell (fig. 20 and 21). This would have been a welcoming sight for new and returning visitors as they walked up to Ele's Place in addition to relating to the imagery in other artwork at both Flint's and Lansing's locations. However, because of the agreement with the church, this was not an available location. Instead, the mural is placed on the opposite side of the wall, a placement that allows visitors to see it as they walk through the hallway and exit.

To complete the project I was given leftover vinyl matter that Ele's Place had purchased for the locker-covering murals in the main hallway. I was also given some leftover acrylic paints from artists I have previously worked with. I was able to purchase the remainder of the supplies at discounted prices.

Figure 20 (above) and 21: The entrance of the Flint location of Ele's Place is at the top of a stairwell. Krug and I had discussed surrounding this wall with a mural of two trees with branches arching over the doorway (see below).

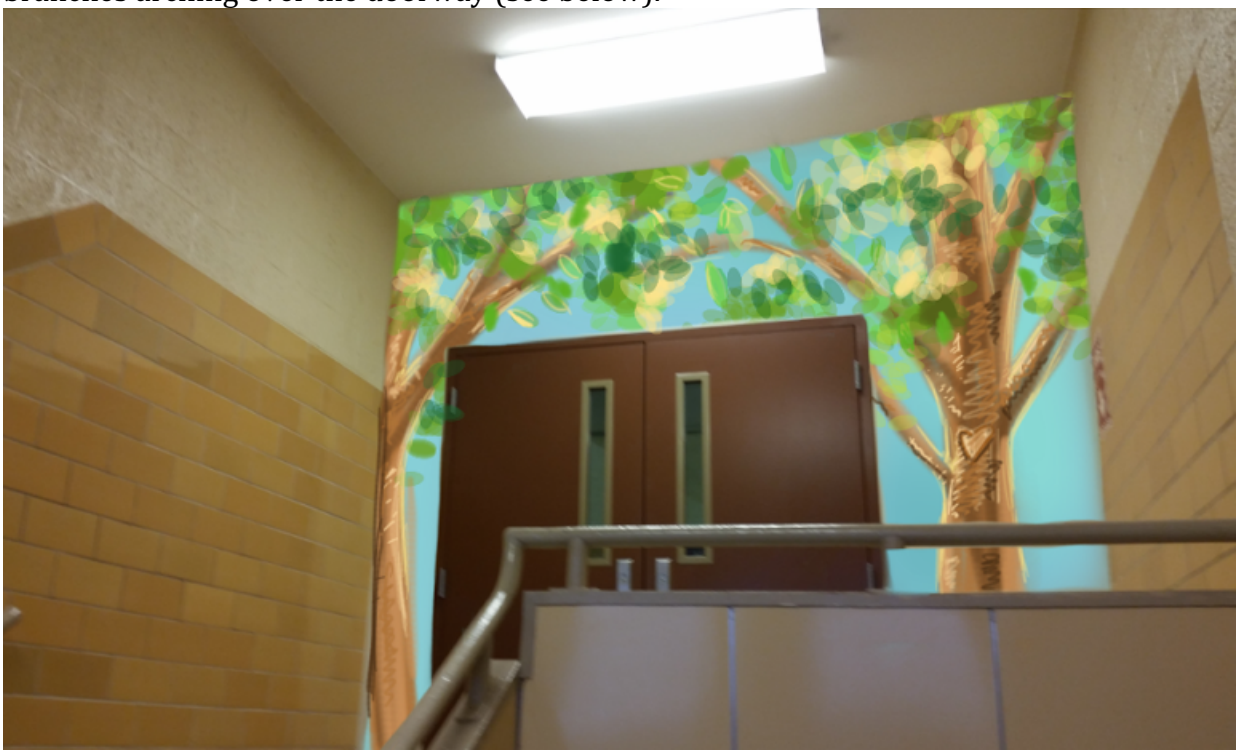

Figure 22: This is the opposite side of the entrance that can be seen from the main hallway. On the right is a list of Ele's Place mission and values.

The final version of the mural is on three pieces of the vinyl material that hangs around the edges of the main entrance. The background is blended with several shades of blue and a swirled texture, in a pattern mimicking Vincent Van Gogh's oil painted skies. A leafy tree branches up on the left side, the widest part of the mural, and arches above the doorway. The brown tones in the bark coordinate with the warm yellows and reds present in the hallway and the brown paint of the doorway. Blades of grass, pale white flowers, and tiny ladybugs add details to the bottom portion of the mural. Lastly, a heart carved into the tree trunk has the initials "EP" painted, an abbreviation of Ele's Place.

The mural can stand alone, but it is also simple enough to be used for programming efforts. I wanted Ele's Place to have the option to use this mural as a piece of decoration, but also a tool for programming. Krug and I discussed the possibilities of having pieces that could

be attached and removed for the children in programs like the at the Lansing location. By creating attachable pieces like apples, flowers, or leaves, the children could decorate the pieces and include them in their counseling space. And, since the building is shared, the pieces could be removed when children left the program, or if the church needed to use the building and deemed the decoration inappropriate for their guests. While Krug and her staff are still discussing the possibilities, the latest idea was to have detachable balloons for the children that would coordinate with a balloon release activity that they do in the spring.

Figure 23: The mural in its final form, taken from the hallway. This is the exit to the stairway.

The installation of the vinyl material was more difficult than I anticipated. While I had measured out the vinyl pieces to fit with an inch of extra material, the pieces did not fit perfectly around the door and time had to be given to making adjustments for the molding and border of the doorway. Once the size was correct, the double sided tape was used to secure the banner, but it had to be carefully placed in the right position the first time, or else the tape could not be

repositioned. While the use of the vinyl was convenient in many ways, installing the mural was time consuming and frustrating. There are areas of the mural that are warped, but overall the banner material fit into place.

Figure 24: Installing the mural proved to be difficult, and resulted in the slight warping of the vinyl on the upper portions.

Figure 25: Warping can also be seen on the right side of the doorway.

Conclusion

Although children's grief counseling is a relatively new part of human service nonprofits, it is clear that research from other areas of psychology can help influence children on a subconscious level. Nonprofits like Ele's Place face limited budgets, varying degrees of community support, and often lack resources that would enable them to design the ideal counseling space. By placing some of the information gained by various studies into the framework of a peer grief counseling service, it becomes easier to identify how small changes in a space can make the difference in the experience of a grieving child. The mural I painted for Ele's Place not only introduces well-testing colors and imagery to the hallway, but also provides an opportunity for programming. Interactive art pieces like this mural and the graffiti-style fence at East Lansing's location can be achievable projects to enhance counseling spaces.

While research is continuing to be done on the environment's impact on children, particularly in counseling spaces, I hope that nonprofits like Ele's Place are able to invest energy into designing their spaces thoughtfully. Working with designers in the community may assist nonprofits in making beneficial designs as well as opportunities for programming.

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