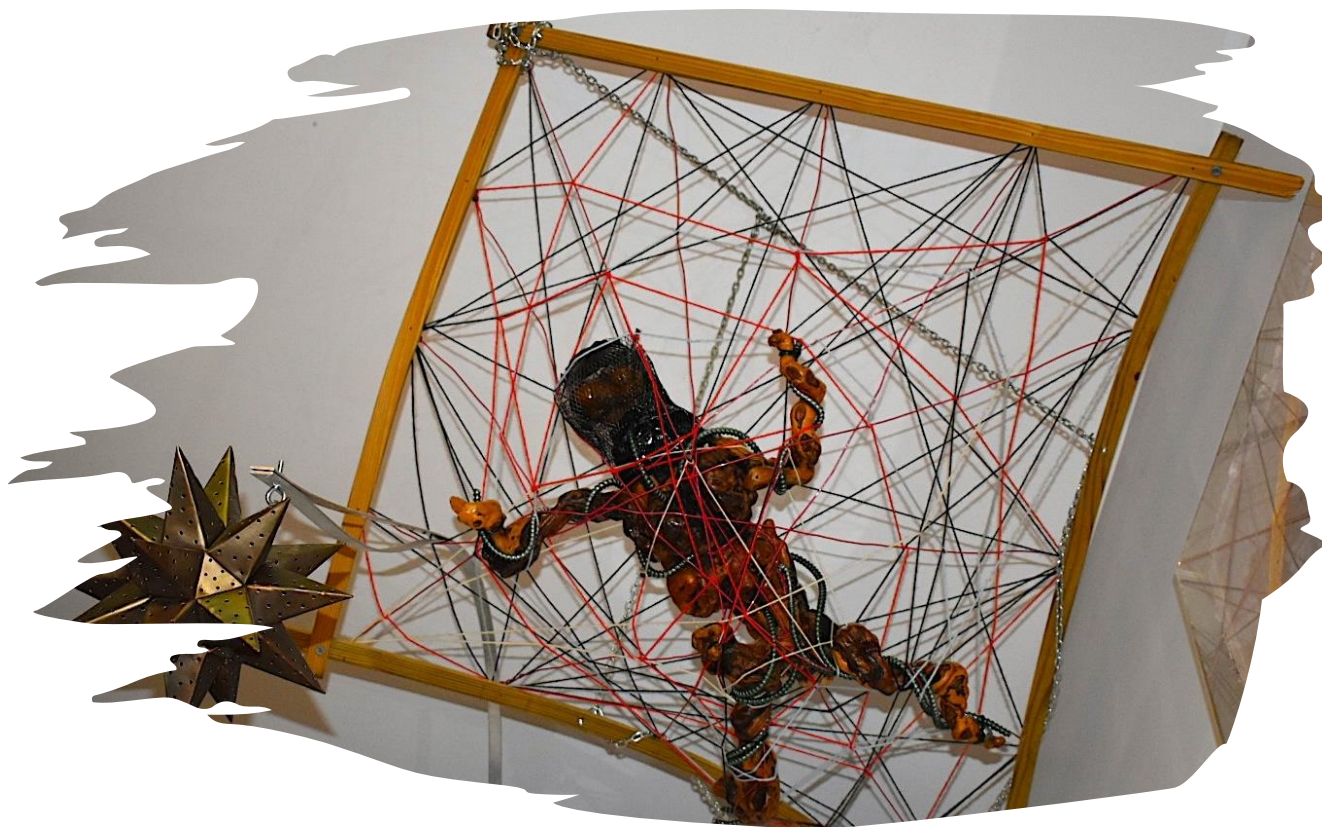


# *From the Margins to the Center*



*Artwork of the Post Traumatic Stress Center*





*Post Traumatic Stress Center*

*19 Edwards Street*

*New Haven, Connecticut*

*1997 - 2024*

## *A Brief History*

The Center is housed in a firehouse built in 1874, designed for horse-drawn fire trucks. The first floor could not have beams to support the upper floors because these would spook the horses, so the entire building is held up by a brace system on the roof from which metal rods descend in order to hold up the ceiling. Closed in 1962, the building remained vacant until 1974 when it was redesigned as a mixed-use building that housed a well-known restaurant, and Planned Parenthood and a pediatrician's office on the second floor. David arrived in 1982 and gradually took over the second floor, and in 1997 Hadar and David formed the Post Traumatic Stress Center. In 2004, we took over the first floor. The building has been fighting fires in one form or another since its origin.



## *Foreword*

Trauma brings destruction, darkness, and despair. Healing reignites creativity, reimagining, and hope. The Post Traumatic Stress Center, a specialty clinic for treating clients who suffer from severe trauma, was more than a place for therapy: the place itself was an integral part of that healing. The artwork that adorned the space reminded everyone of the nature of the work: that tremendous courage is required to face one's perpetrators and delve into the details of the traumatic narrative. The artwork powerfully illustrates that excavating the layers of darkness brings to light the brilliance of human resilience and survival.

In this collection, the therapist/artist David Read Johnson shares his perspectives and reactions to the work with trauma. Through images, sculptures, constructions, pictures and poems, the monstrous images of the perpetrators and the chaos of those horrific moments are transformed into revelatory pieces of art.

Molding the unimaginable horror of perpetration into shapes and colors helps viewers gain entry into the chaotic and fragmented experience of trauma that often defies witnessing. The viewer is provided aesthetic distance, but without avoidance. These images are in your face and in your gut. They are both visceral and metaphoric. They are disturbing and inspiring. But mostly they are raw expressions of how the trauma therapist navigates the therapeutic journey.

The artwork inspired our clients to express their traumatic experiences in artistic media as well, and their paintings, poems, and sculptures coexist side by side with the Center's art, being a reminder of the collaborative nature of the therapeutic relationship.

The insidious forces of trauma seize and dominate the victim's senses, invade their minds and bodies, and separates them from society. Displaying trauma-centered art throughout their place of healing proclaims boldly that they are safe here, which in turn frees them to mourn. This transcendent space becomes a gateway for reentry, a way to be welcomed home. In this moment of reconnection, we all heal.

*Hadar Lubin, MD, Co-Director*

*Artwork, poetry, and commentary by David Read Johnson unless otherwise specified.*

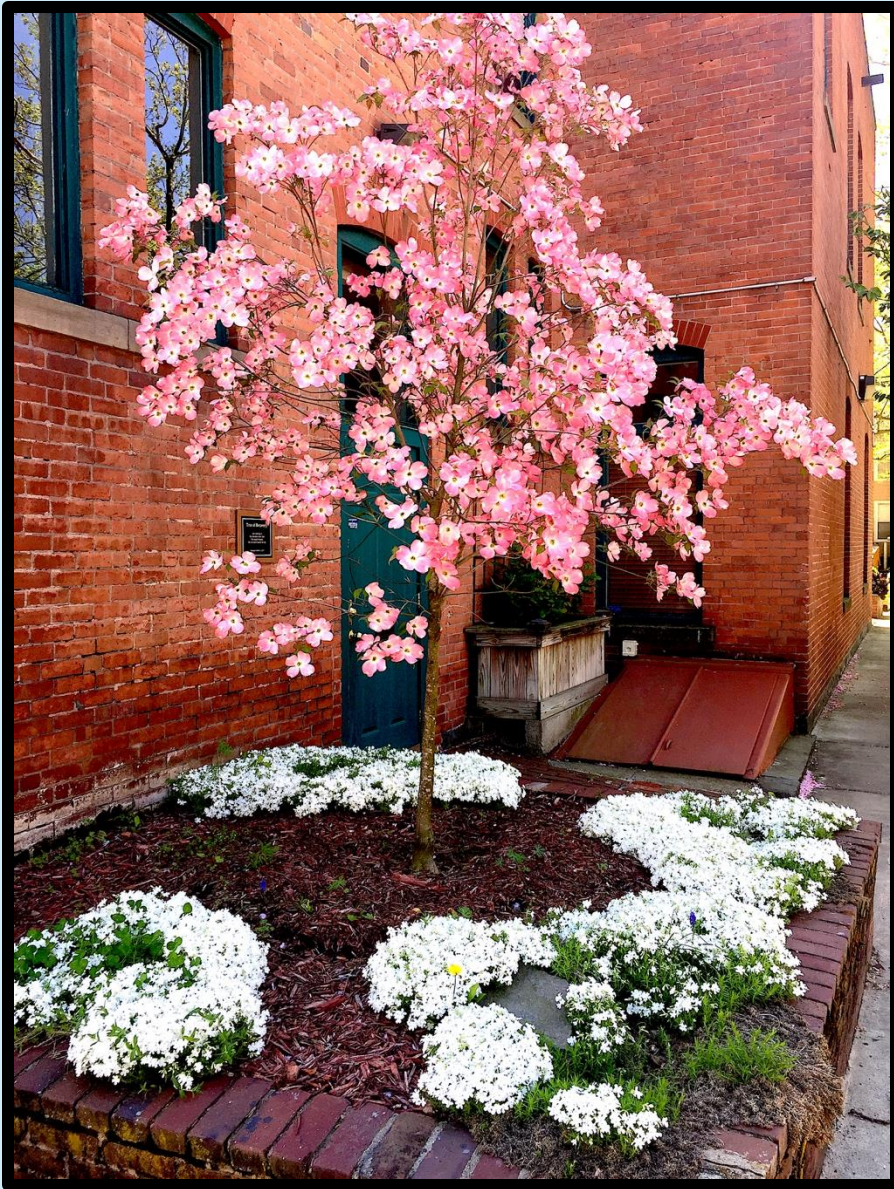


*Let all who pass here know what this place is for.*

This 9-foot steel beam from the north tower of the World Trade Center was acquired in 2008 through a crazed process of tracking down where all the steel from the disaster was exported from, begging for the donation, and an unsettling drive in a rental truck over the George Washington Bridge in a rainstorm with the risk of breakdown due to the incredible weight. We wanted an undamaged piece to stand for the strength of the survivors. The beam is bolted to a huge underground block of cement and secured with more cement around its base, and covered with pink Stony Creek granite, the same as that of the Statue of Liberty. The beam is within arms reach of passers-by to allow them to feel its mass. The entire monument weighs over 9 tons. A local artist contributed a copper wire bird of peace flying out of the gap in the top.







Just outside the side door of the Center, this pink dogwood blooms brightly in the spring, reminding us of the Earth's eternal renewal.





In the vestibule of the Center, before entering the waiting room, visitors have an opportunity to write down what or who helped them in their recovery and place the tag on the silver tree. The tree is full.





This original, commissioned painting by Israeli artist Rafi Baler, cut into four squares and reconnected, depicts the Twin Towers in a whirlwind of bright colors and shapes, an emanation of both beauty and horror.



This spontaneously spray-painted depiction of the Twin Towers before their demise by an unidentified street artist in Madison, Wisconsin elevates the scene into cosmic dimensions, with earth and sun.





## *The Bell Tolls for Thee*

This brass bell hangs in the waiting room just out of reach of visitors, asking to be rung. Oh, how the trauma victim wishes a bell had rung to warn of the danger! This bell was rung each year on the anniversary of 911, at the moment the towers were hit, and when they fell.

## *Trauma Schema 911*

This piece of steel is one of the cross supports from the World Trade Center, twisted during the collapse, reflects the impact of trauma. The large movable bolts along its side are attractive objects for visitors to fiddle with, giving them a physical means of contact with the event. The presence of the piece in the waiting room, at chest height, and within reach, catches people off guard. To touch it is to place your hand on history.







*“Some things are meant to be broken;  
others, not.*

*Some things fall out of our hands;  
others, cannot.*

*How strong we are!  
How fragile we are!*

*I only wish you  
had been able to tell the difference.”*

Neglect is very damaging to people, especially children, and is too often denied or reframed as a means to support independence and resilience, or to prevent dependency. When does a parent give their child room, and when do they not notice? We can be fragile; or strong. Is it the parent's obligation to know?



*"Today will be the day  
That my fragile world will fall  
This teetering house of suffering will collapse  
And I will be freed of What Happened Then.*

*All that matters is that I am caught by You!  
I see your outstretched hands!  
I feel the building sway!  
Now is the time....  
I cannot wait for tomorrow...  
again."*



It takes great courage to place your trust in a therapist with whom you will share the details of the traumatic event. One first delays, resists, refuses. Their outstretched hands only remind you of the promises made before, then broken. Will therapy tip this house of cards?





## *DSM - Trauma Version*

The cause of mental illness has been hotly debated from the beginning of the field, given how many ways a person can be broken! For those of us in the trauma field, the shapes of the broken pieces are less important than figuring out who dropped the plate.



*PTSD Toolkit*

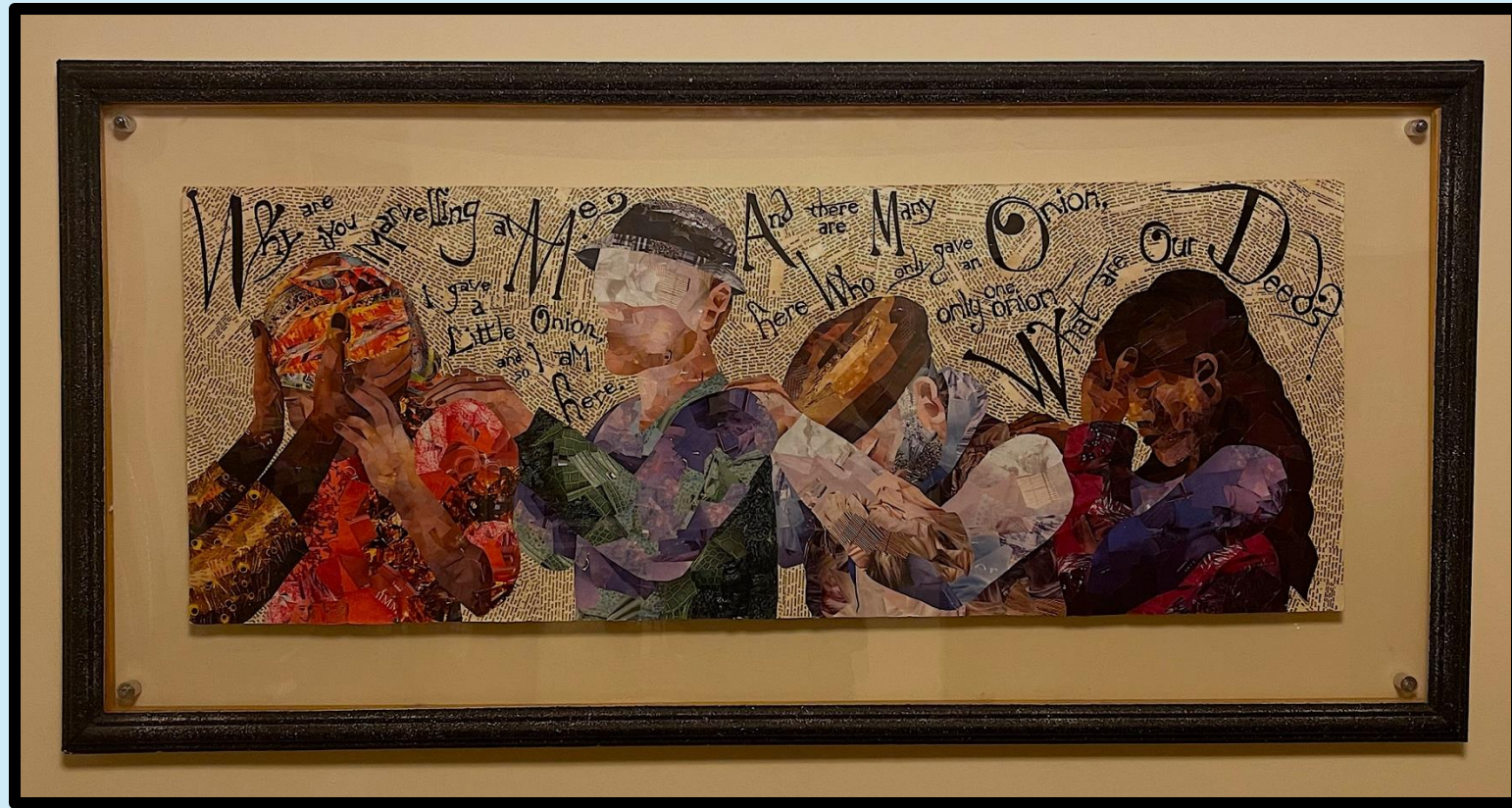
*9345 Pieces*

*Assembly Required*



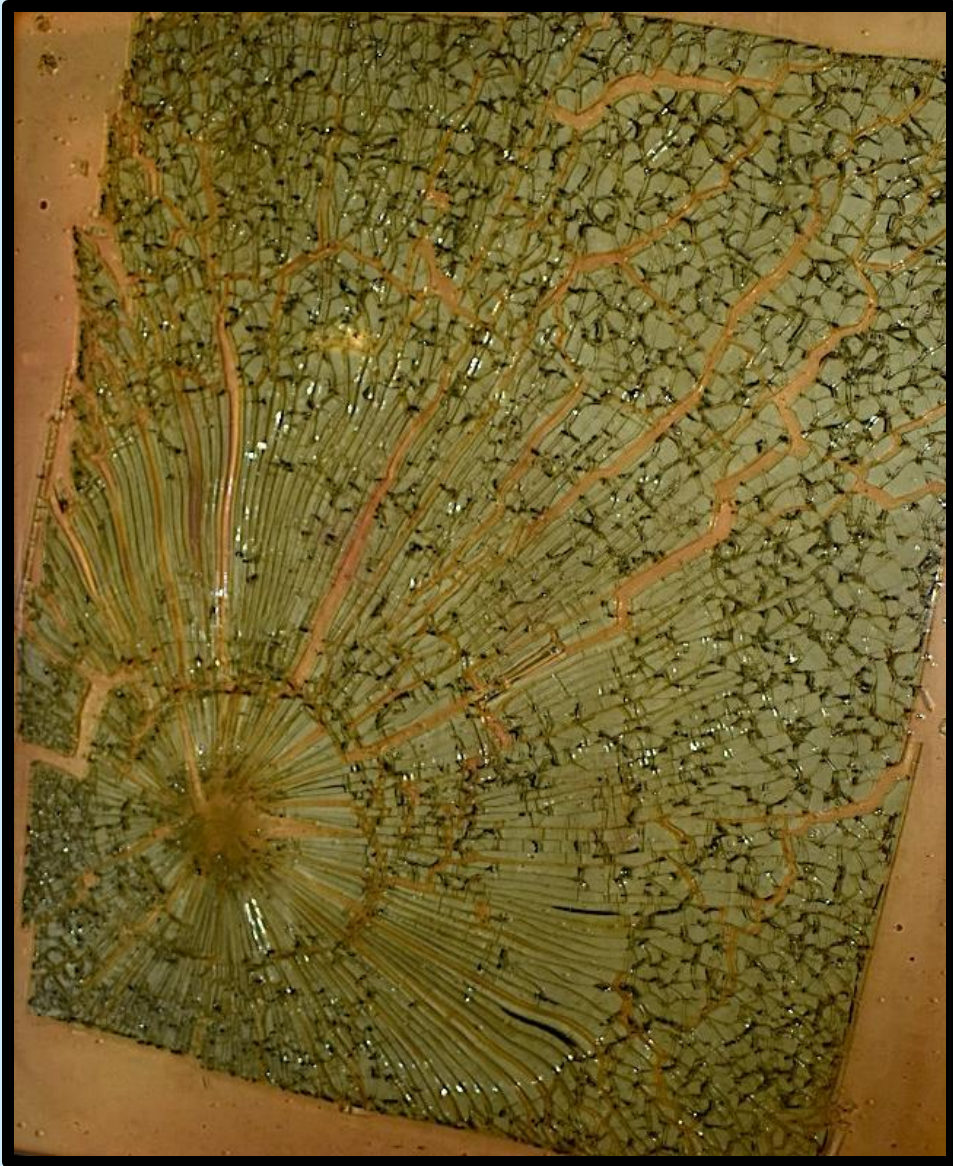
The sarcasm inherent in this piece reflects the current trend in mental health to reduce recovery to learning a set of skills; healing becoming a process of following the instructions. Maybe.





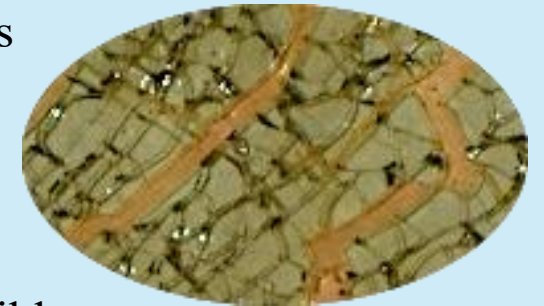
This collage by Connecticut artist Emily Cersonsky is inspired by the tale of “The Onion” in the Brothers Karamazov about a wicked witch who was thrown into a burning lake of hell for her misdeeds. She begs God to be given one more chance because once she gave an onion to a beggar woman. God relents and offers her an onion to hold onto as he pulls her from the lake. Three others in the lake, seeing her being pulled out, grab onto her but she angrily shakes them off, saying, “this is only for me!” In that moment, the onion breaks and she falls back into the lake as well. Victims of trauma are often asked of their perpetrators: “Is one good deed enough to pull the wicked out from their burning lake?” If perpetrators have some good in them, can they be forgiven?





## *Time Heals All Wounds*

They do say that time heals all wounds. However, this shattered glass makes one wonder. I had a great time creating it: placing the plate glass on the table, covered by a plastic sheet to prevent scatter, and then placing a metal spike on an unsuspecting spot and striking it with a hammer. My first strike apparently was too restrained, my hesitation no doubt out of respect for all the victims, so a second one was necessary.....this time resulting in a shattering deserving of trauma. Pouring the clear acrylic over the glass was equally comforting, preserving the damage. The simultaneous recognition of time's healing power and the visual evidence of an irreversible injury gives room for each person to come to their own conclusions.





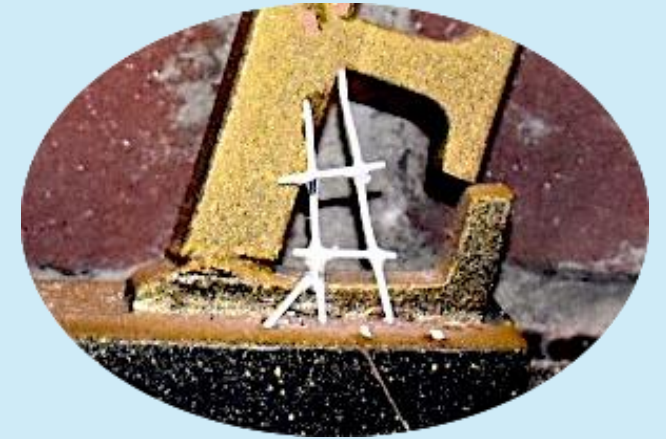
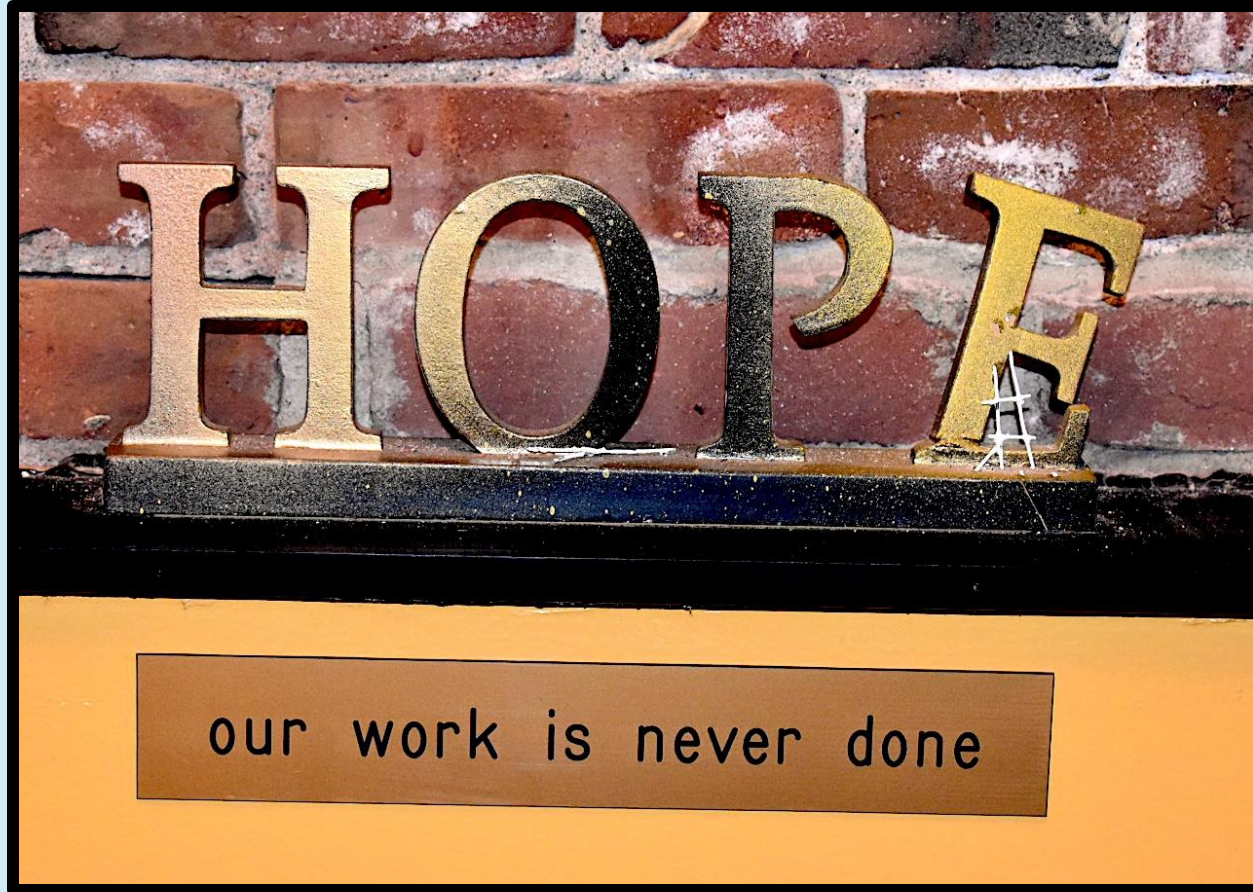


*Reconnecting....*

*One memory at a time*



The life of a therapist is fundamentally private. Yes, there are arenas for sharing: your colleagues; your supervisor; publications; but the most important and intimate moments that occur in therapy are mostly kept to oneself. Many of them are indescribable; if they are put into words, they collapse into platitudes. This interactive sculpture was intended to provide some way for therapists on our team to record in physical form these moments of connection, of repair: symbolized by telephone cables with their thin wires reminding us of neurons, broken apart by the intrusion of trauma. We begin with all the cables separated, and gradually our therapists take two ends and twist them together, until eventually all of the wires are reconnected, sometimes after a year or two, whereupon we untie them and began all over again, replicating the Sisyphean nature of therapist's work. Each time I passed by this piece, I felt my heavy heart lift, just a bit, taking another breath, turn the corner, then climbing the spiral stair to my office.



Hope is the essential ingredient in the recovery from trauma, but it requires constant attention. After all the terrible things burst forth from Pandora's Box, hope emerges.

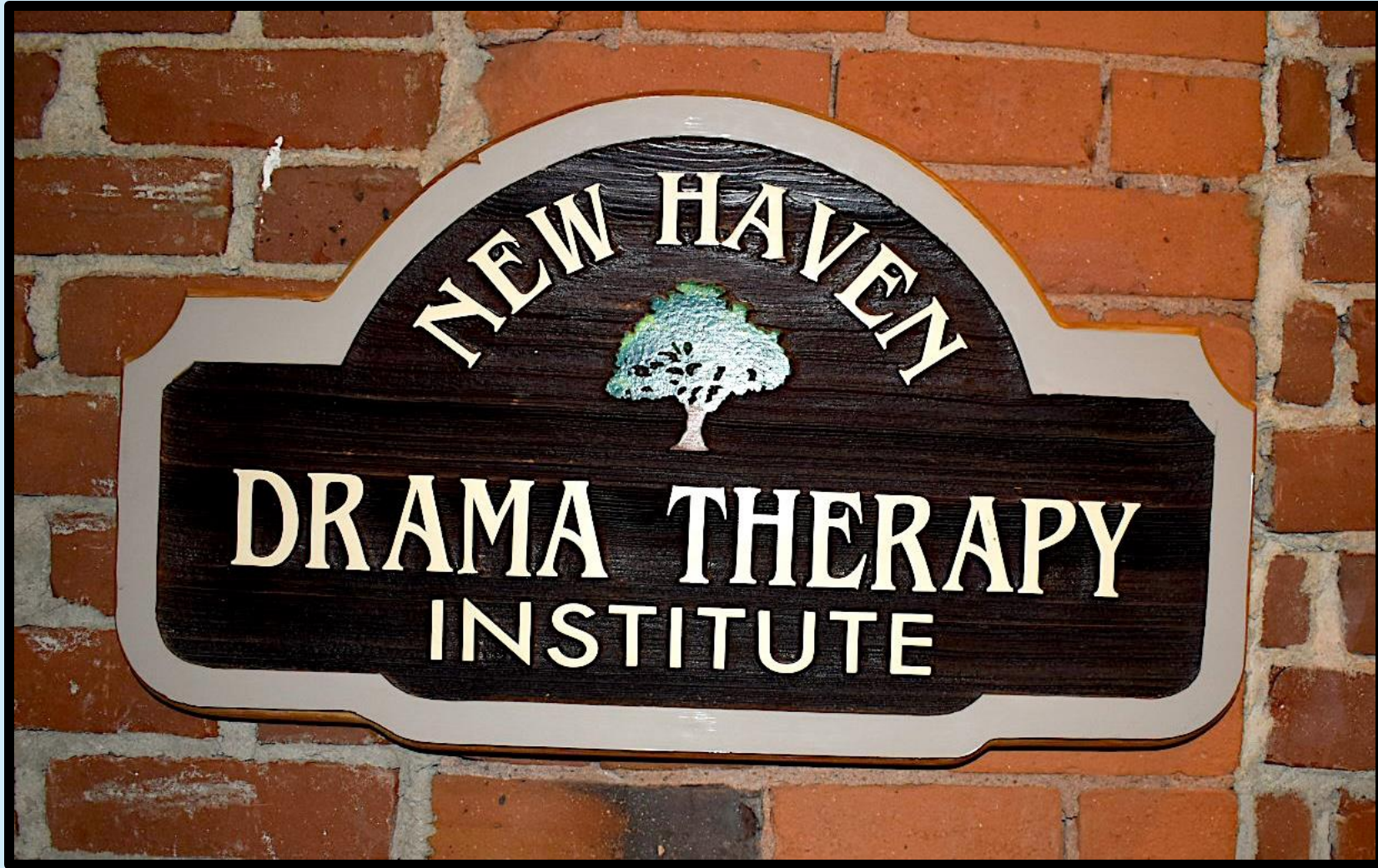




*“perpetrator  
caught in the web  
of his own  
lies  
truth  
persists”*



This piece, hanging in the stairwell entrance to the second floor, was one of the first artistic pieces in the Center. As I left the Center at the end of each day, the horrors I had heard from my clients haunted me. The sadness and grief were burdensome, though I knew how to carry a burden. The anxiety and fear created tension, but I turned that tension into commitment to the fight. But it was the anger at the perpetrators, most of whom had gotten away with their acts, that hurt the most, causing a sense of helplessness and loss of confidence. I felt like screaming. I felt like going out into the street and yelling out each of their names and what they did. Sometimes the half hour commute home allowed me to scream in my car. But it was not enough. So I constructed this sculpture of a perpetrator caught in a web. It is made of twisted pieces of driftwood, attached to each other with long metal spikes that I hammered into the wood with glee. I then wrapped it in pieces of metal conduit and random objects, distorted and damaged, for good measure. Nearly every day for twenty years, as I descended the stairs, I paused and looked up at him, and cursed. It helped.



This wood piece sculpted by New Haven artist Alice Forrester honored our commitment to drama therapy.





*“In the wake  
of my recovery  
lay these remains.*



*Page upon page  
of sorrow and trembling  
etched in the dark ink of night.*

*Time now for an unburdening.*

*Let them lay here*

*in this quiet place  
markers of the winding path  
that leads on and up  
and far ahead.”*

## *The Remnant Wall*

This interactive wall sculpture consists of large sections encased in plexiglass, open at the top, for our clients to deposit their diaries, artwork, mementos, and objects associated with their trauma and their recovery, at the end of their treatment. We provide them with a ladder to stand on for the ceremony. As they speak or read what they need to say, their therapist, staff, and group therapy members stand below to honor their journey. It is always a moment of awe. The idea came to us because many survivors are not sure what to do with these remnants once they have recovered: do they burn them in their backyard, preserve them in a box in the basement? The first seems irreversible. The second a burden. So by gifting them to the Center they can simultaneously get rid of them, and preserve them. Over time, the exhibit became filled, layered, mixed, impenetrable.





*“Trauma has a  
tendency  
to rearrange  
one’s  
sense  
of home.”*

This sculpture by artist A.E. Aaronsohn depicts the disruption and dislocation that comes with trauma.



This playful revision of the Humpty Dumpty verse fills in what most trauma victims are likely to feel after being pushed off the wall, and then having promises made by important people (doctors, police), only to have to call upon their own resources in the end.





We found this mahogany circle in the basement and at first did not know what it was. We finally figured out that this was the wooden ring that circled the brass pole that the firefighters slid down from their second-floor bunks to the horse-drawn trucks on the first floor. It is a magnificent piece of mahogany, now hoisted up to the ceiling, hovering above us, a portal now for therapists, just a different kind of firefighter.



*“your sticks  
your stones  
may break my bones  
your names  
intend to crush me  
but my hands  
will rise  
to point you out  
and my eyes  
will see  
right through you”*

This wall sculpture consists of large, broken bamboo trunks bolted to the wall amidst rocks emerging from the wall. I thoroughly enjoyed breaking the bamboo, though I was amazed at how hard it was! I had to jump on them from quite a height! The stones I pillaged from a pet store, being plastic pseudo-rocks for snakes and turtles. The poem highlights the intensity of the trauma survivor’s drive to seek the truth and confront the perpetrator with their deed.





*Gloria Victis*

This statue, sculpted by Antonin Mercie in 1874 (the same year our firehouse was built!), depicts the honor held by those struck down by life. This sculpture became the treasured symbol of Dr. Edward Trudeau, the inspiring leader of the modern treatment of tuberculosis, centered in Saranac Lake, New York. He believed that recovery is achieved through “acquiescence,” that is, acceptance - not denial. The title means, “honor to the victim.”



This box sat in my office, enticing my clients to open it. The key to the lock hung in plain sight. Most felt the urge to open it. I told them, “aren’t you ignoring the sign? Shall I ignore your statements not to open up about your trauma?”





Miss Kendra' Red Hat is the symbol of the imaginary figure in our school-based, trauma-centered program. Miss Kendra strengthens the inner nurturing parent inside each student, being a person who notices, who cares, who knows what might have happened. The red hat is perhaps that protective shield that buffers the fears and uncertainties of life.

*Miss Kendra's Red Hat*



Oh, But for the Grace of God, Go I!



Oh, that we could live a life unbroken!  
Human beings hold onto a hope of  
living in peace, and safety, and love.  
When trauma strikes, that is shattered.





This constructed mural by group members of Marni Rosen's art therapy group illustrates both the disjunction and connection that group therapy of trauma evokes: each person remains alone in the solitude of their specific traumatic experience yet, through the group process, finds a way to link themselves back into the social web. It is always a worthwhile struggle.



## *Recovery*

This sculpture by Israeli artist Rafi Baler, made of cardboard and a metal wheel, careens dangerously to the side despite the giddy smile, like a six-year old on their first bike ride. I placed it in our conference room without a title, and one of my men's group members, seeing it for the first time, commented, "Yup. That's what recovery feels like!"

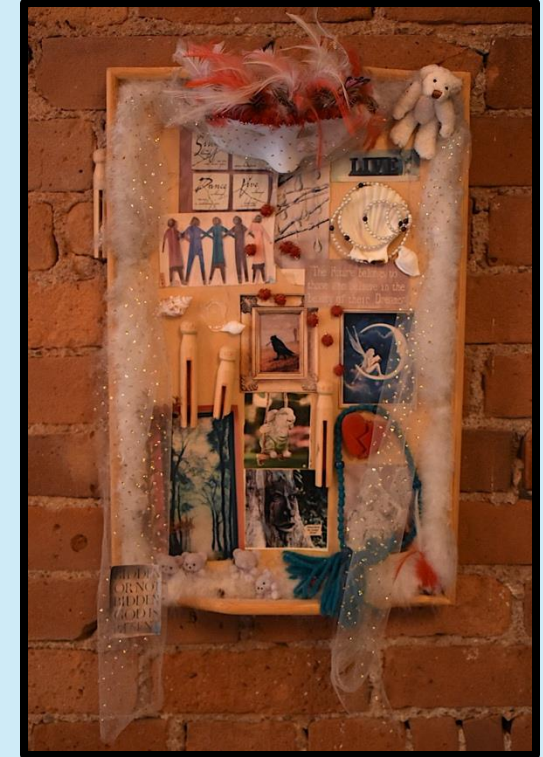




## *Vessels of Heart and Brain*

This original oil painting by New Haven artist William More evokes the intertwining paths of client and therapist as they navigate the darkness.





Three clients of Marni Rosen produced these trauma boxes. Colorful, aesthetic when viewed from afar; once one moves closer and their details are revealed: broken bodies, sexual organs, torn images of violence, grief-stricken words, the viewer pulls back with other feelings. There is only a narrow distance from which to appreciate the work.





This interactive representation of the Center's logo shows the severing of the whole by trauma, and the gradual transcendence of the damage by individuals who courageously thread their colored yarn across the divide.





## The PTSC Family Tree

This piece created by our staff in honor of the Center's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, with tree and stones, creatively manifests the importance of our personal and professional relationships – through supervision and collaboration on the challenging cases we faced. The intense interpersonal environment generated so much mutual influence, with each staff member contributing their own unique history, perspectives, opinions, questions, and concerns. Our model of trauma-centered psychotherapy emerged organically out of these intimate collaborations over the years, celebrated in our retreats, holiday skits, and seasonal events.



