

CultureWorks: Kat
Long Haul Productions // MCACA Creating Connection project

INTRO: We're excited to bring you stories from a new first-person series on the personal and community impacts of arts programs in Michigan. Our first story comes from CultureWorks in Holland, MI. CultureWorks is a art and design program for youth from ALL backgrounds. Sixteen-year-old Kat shares the story of how she came to CultureWorks, and how it's helped her deal with mental illness.

KAT: All my life I've dealt with pretty bad bullying. When I was young I was beat up a ton. I was ridiculed constantly.

MUSIC

In seventh grade, people would call me fat and disgusting and push me around in the halls. And I tried talking to my school about it and they just basically gave 'em a slap on the wrist. Say don't do that. And it actually got worse after that. So I tried to strangle myself with a jersey in the middle of class. It was more of a cry for help. But my best friend laughed at me and said, "That's a cute tie." I was totally broken down, and so scared.

MUSIC

I was looking for a way to still be on online school, but also have a social activity that I could do to try and get rid of my social anxiety and be more open with people after my huge bullying incident. And my first day at CultureWorks I was so nervous I was on the verge of tears. But one of the interns came and talked to me and she seemed genuinely interested in what I did, and that felt really great. People really started opening up to me, and I felt actually a part of the class. The people here helped you grow with your art and learn with your art but also feel better about your art.

MUSIC

I really love to make emotions with my drawings, to put into my drawings

exactly how my anxiety felt in a physical way and understand it a lot better. I call them mental monsters. The first one that I drew I wanted multiple arms so that they feel like they're wrapped around me, easier to strangle me with, and sharp teeth to make that tingly feeling that I feel sometimes, and a shredded mouth because I feel like I can't speak a lot of the times. It feels like a giant elephant on my chest. My art helped me separate the disorders for me because I always felt like the disorders is that makes me me, but it helped me be like, "No that's not me! It's not me that I hate. It's these monsters that I hate."

MUSIC

There was one day in my second photography class, and I felt utterly crappy. And I was actually feeling suicidal again, and I didn't want anything to do with anybody but I forced myself to go. And at the end I was feeling amazing. I showed one of my artworks I was really proud of. One of my friends said "I love it!" So I felt really great.

MUSIC

I feel a lot more wanted when I'm here. So I definitely have a lot more self-worth. My social anxiety would have just festered if I hadn't had any way to get out there. A lot of people outside of CultureWorks will look at me funny because it's so conservative. But my friends here are different sexualities and love the hair and makeup that I have. And so I feel really happy here, and I feel like I can succeed. I'm not useless. Not just like a depressive blob. People encourage me and it feels amazing. People care about me. I feel like an actual person who can actually be happy and have a great life.

MUSIC

BACK ANNOUNCE: Our story on CultureWorks was produced by Elizabeth Meister and Dan Collison of Long Haul Productions, with support from the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs as part of their Creating Connection project. Thanks to Kat, Emily Christensen and the students at CultureWorks for their openness.