

SecondAct

Translating the Pain of Eating Disorders into Art

Sculpture fueled Judith Shaw's recovery and gave her a new life as an artist.

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Judith Shaw's sculpture is constructed of naked materials -- empty boxes, paper cups, plastic utensils, rubber bands, and tape measures. She gives each work a title such as "Next to Nothing,"

"Missing Piece" and "Hunger Pain." Only recently has she used "Well-Rounded."

That's because, when Shaw started making these pieces five years ago, hunger was her whole world. She was a 53-year-old woman battling acute anorexia. Today she's a thriving artist.

Shaw's transformation began in 2005 when her yoga teacher told her, "There's nothing left of you. You're the only one who can decide to change that." Shaw had just separated from her husband of 33 years. She had two grown sons. An obsessively "healthy" eater and over-exerciser, she'd developed anemia, low bone density and fractures of the elbow and pubic bone. She was frail and malnourished, and yet, because anorexia is most common in teenagers and young women, no one, not even Shaw's doctor, had identified her eating disorder until her yoga teacher spoke up.

"She said it so compassionately, yet also truthfully," Shaw recalls. "That night I said to myself, 'I'm anorexic.'"



How to Save a Life

She began researching treatment options and entered McCallum Place, a residential eating disorders program in St. Louis. Most patients were teenagers or twentysomethings. "Luckily, I had my own room!"

She laughs now and credits the program with saving her life. But adjustment wasn't easy. Before raising her sons, she had been a senior vice president of a Madison Avenue PR agency in New York City, and after they were grown she worked as a pediatric medical assistant. Now she was living in a dorm with patients younger than her children. They played loud music and

watched television incessantly. Many of them resisted treatment and denied they were sick.

Shaw was wise enough to realize it wasn't her job to fix anybody else. "I thought, 'I just need to focus on myself and my own healing.' The biggest relief came with knowing that I had to eat. I was so hungry!"

But eating was only part of the recovery process. Shaw's emptiness was more than physical, as she discovered when her therapist asked her to list the major life events that might have contributed to her eating disorder. At first she balked at the assignment. How could a list of words and dates explain an experience that was all about *feeling*? Instead, she made a life-size paper silhouette of her body and labeled it "Running on Empty."

That paper cut-out spoke for her. It told everyone who saw it how flat and blank her illness made her feel, how it reduced her whole being to two dimensions. She marveled at the eloquence of a simple sheet of paper and began to experiment with other materials. By molding her lower body with plastic wrap, she found she could sculpt the

invisibility she felt. By lining a cardboard box with empty black-and-white takeout containers, she could symbolize the black-and-white thinking about food that had ruled her life for years. By arranging a group of cylinders, she visualized the impact of her eating disorder on relationships within her family.

Sharing Her Art

The treatment center invited Shaw to exhibit her sculpture during a reunion of former patients and their families. The response was overwhelming. People with eating disorders often grow frustrated by the inability of others to grasp the sense of emotional and mental bondage that traps them in these illnesses. Shaw had found a powerful way to translate the experience of eating disorders into images that anyone could appreciate.

At the same time, Shaw's art was giving her a passionate and precise voice that she'd never had before. Through her "body of work," she was reflecting on past events, relationships, and emotions and finding new meaning in and between them. Her sculpture had become a vital key to her recovery. After two and a half months, she left McCallum Place determined to develop her new life as an artist.

She had several solo shows in art venues, which led to an interest in exhibiting the work in medical schools. "Other than specialists in the field," she says, "too few doctors have any idea what goes on in the mind of someone with an eating disorder. This is a fundamental barrier to early diagnosis and effective treatment."

Last year during National Eating Disorders Awareness Week, Shaw arranged for her "Body of Work: The Art of Eating Disorder Recovery" to be exhibited at the School of Medicine at Washington University in St. Louis in conjunction with a panel discussion of eating disorder professionals.

Catherine Butler, an MD candidate at the school and coordinator of the Mental Health Outreach Program, confirmed Shaw's suspicion that her sculptures could be powerful learning tools for doctors and future doctors. "The art draws on a personal and emotional understanding that we don't get in the classroom," Butler says.

Other medical professionals agreed. This March, Shaw will be showing her work at Columbia University Medical Center.

A New Beginning

Since leaving McCallum Place five years ago, Shaw has maintained a healthy weight. She says each pound gained represents tons of health and happiness. Today, she has a large, airy studio in a loft building in St. Louis' Central West End. Her range of materials has expanded to include light bulbs, woven fibers and filled fabric. Oh, and now she's the one teaching yoga.

"I am investigating being recovered," Shaw says, "versus in recovery. The process is exhilarating."