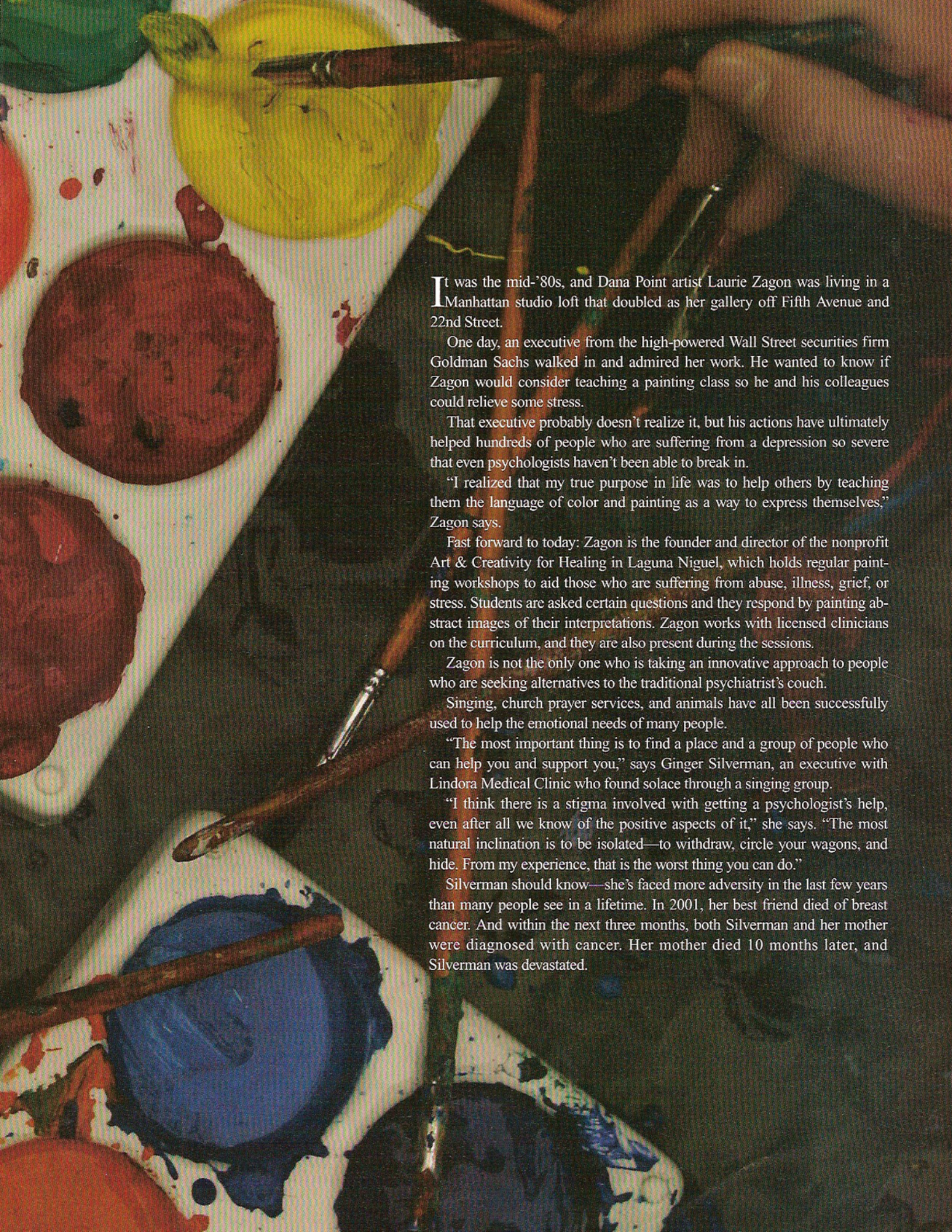




paint & sing your troubles away

FOR MANY,
THE BEST FORM OF THERAPY
DOESN'T HAPPEN ON A PSYCHIATRIST'S COUCH—
IT COMES FROM CREATIVITY WITHIN

by Tori Richards



It was the mid-'80s, and Dana Point artist Laurie Zagon was living in a Manhattan studio loft that doubled as her gallery off Fifth Avenue and 22nd Street.

One day, an executive from the high-powered Wall Street securities firm Goldman Sachs walked in and admired her work. He wanted to know if Zagon would consider teaching a painting class so he and his colleagues could relieve some stress.

That executive probably doesn't realize it, but his actions have ultimately helped hundreds of people who are suffering from a depression so severe that even psychologists haven't been able to break in.

"I realized that my true purpose in life was to help others by teaching them the language of color and painting as a way to express themselves," Zagon says.

Fast forward to today: Zagon is the founder and director of the nonprofit Art & Creativity for Healing in Laguna Niguel, which holds regular painting workshops to aid those who are suffering from abuse, illness, grief, or stress. Students are asked certain questions and they respond by painting abstract images of their interpretations. Zagon works with licensed clinicians on the curriculum, and they are also present during the sessions.

Zagon is not the only one who is taking an innovative approach to people who are seeking alternatives to the traditional psychiatrist's couch.

Singing, church prayer services, and animals have all been successfully used to help the emotional needs of many people.

"The most important thing is to find a place and a group of people who can help you and support you," says Ginger Silverman, an executive with Lindora Medical Clinic who found solace through a singing group.

"I think there is a stigma involved with getting a psychologist's help, even after all we know of the positive aspects of it," she says. "The most natural inclination is to be isolated—to withdraw, circle your wagons, and hide. From my experience, that is the worst thing you can do."

Silverman should know—she's faced more adversity in the last few years than many people see in a lifetime. In 2001, her best friend died of breast cancer. And within the next three months, both Silverman and her mother were diagnosed with cancer. Her mother died 10 months later, and Silverman was devastated.

HEALTH & BEAUTY: THERAPY

She had sung throughout her life—in school as a young child and a teenager, and in television commercials as a young adult. That passion then gave way to the chore of everyday living, and before she knew it 25 years had passed. Silverman hadn't really thought about tapping into the part of her soul that she loved the most until her mother asked her to do it as she lay dying.

"I thought, 'How am I going to sing after all this?'" Silverman recalls. "Then I realized that music was something I had been living without for a very long time. I decided to incorporate music into my healing process."

Silverman was already visiting a therapist and using antidepressants. But she came upon a church in San Clemente that holds Sunday services on the beach and joined the choir. She took voice lessons and then found a San Juan Capistrano organization called South Coast Singers. The nonprofit group holds regular choral practice sessions, and is hired to sing at various churches and special events.

Now, despite myriad other medical problems, countless surgeries, and a broken marriage, Silverman has found that she no longer needs antidepressants.

"My main recovery tool has been my singing," she says. "Many people in this group are cancer survivors; they're using music to recover their lives."

Although it's not as dramatic as saving someone's life, Pat Guiver has founded a program that uses animals to bring people out of depression.

Guiver is president of the Orange County Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Ten years ago, a convalescent



Art & Creativity for Healing

HEALTH & BEAUTY: THERAPY

home contacted her about the possibility of bringing animals into the facility to cheer up the residents. Guiver found a volunteer pet and owner to accomplish this task, and soon other requests for therapy came in.

She decided to help the society set up a program called Pets Are Wonderful Support, or PAWS. Now about 85 dogs and their owners regularly visit hospitals, convalescent homes, and children's shelters.

"Sometimes the [hospital] staff will comment on a change in their patients after a dog visits—it's the first time they've seen that person smile or talk," Guiver says.

And in one instance, a little girl who was in a coma started showing a reaction on her heart monitor when a volunteer beagle was placed on her bed. That was the first time the monitor had shown any reaction out of the ordinary, according to hospital staffers. Eventually the girl came out of the coma and went home.

"I call it the cheapest form of therapy," she says.

While alternative methods of therapy can seem like a good idea, Irvine psychologist Salvatore R. Maddi cautions against using something merely as a Band-Aid without solving the problem.

"The techniques can help people get distracted enough from their problems to feel better, but that's not the same as solving the problem," he says. Being distracted can be good, but what happens if the dog leaves or the person isn't singing anymore? If the solutions aren't well-grounded, the problems will likely come back, he adds.

Maddi has been in practice for 45 years and is on staff at the University of California, Irvine. In 1975, he began researching a new kind of therapy. His subjects were 100 employees from Illinois Bell Telephone who went through the telephone company monopoly breakup. While most had varying degrees of depression, he found that a third of them had thrived because of a positive attitude, excellent coping skills, and a strong social support network.

Maddi decided to put together a course to teach people the skills that this small group of Bell employees had used to flourish. He founded the Hardiness Institute in Newport Beach and began offering Hardiness Training—a self-paced

course that can last up to 20 weeks. A workbook is provided with exercises, and each participant is assigned a trainer who is contacted via phone or e-mail.

The program has proved so successful that it is being used throughout the country in all types of professions, including law enforcement, sports, academia, and medicine. Portions of it have been used by Navy SEALs, the Army War College, and West Point. And it has even become an elective at UC Irvine.

Maddi has found this to be a non-threatening, doable alternative to the psychiatrist's couch, basically because it can be done from the patient's own home.

Whatever the method, people who are depressed need to reach the dark hole that is inside them, Zagon says.

"One way to have the light shine on it is through the creative process," she says. "They can have a look into that darkness and see how it has made them who they are." **OC**

—Tori Richards is a freelance writer who lives in Huntington Beach.

for more info...

Interested in learning more? Check out these organizations:

ART & CREATIVITY FOR HEALING
Chapman University will offer the nation's first Art for Healing certificate program beginning this month.
www.art4healing.org

SOUTH COAST SINGERS
Upcoming concerts are listed on the Web site.
www.southcoastsingers.org

ORANGE COUNTY SOCIETY FOR PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO ANIMALS PAWS PROGRAM
An orientation for new members is scheduled for January 21.
www.orangecountyspca.org/PAWS.htm

SALVATORE R. MADDI
HARDINESS INSTITUTE
www.hardinessinstitute.com