

Interview

Following the tracings of The Red Pencil

Amanda Levey interviews Laurence Vandenborre, founder of The Red Pencil Humanitarian Foundation (www.redpencil.org/about/), to explore how the art-therapy-focused foundation was established, and the factors that have contributed to its rapid growth.

Keywords

Art therapy, disaster relief, The Red Pencil, Singapore, Red Cross

Amanda Levey: *I'm very pleased to talk to you about The Red Pencil. It's a very innovative idea. I'd like you to talk about the history of the idea.*

Laurence Vandenborre: The very initial seed idea of the Red Pencil started in 2004, after the tsunami in South East Asia. At the time I was working at Raffles Hospital [in Singapore] and I worked with a couple of French-speaking children who had been in the tsunami and were repatriated to Singapore, whether those families were staying in Singapore or going back to Europe. Within a few sessions, the children could overcome some post traumatic stress disorder symptoms, and this was affirmed by the testimony of their mothers.

In March 2010, in Zurich, I met with Charlotte Leber who is the founder and President of the Swiss Art Therapy Foundation. Charlotte was intervening in five university hospitals all over Switzerland (today she intervenes in ten university hospitals). We decided to collaborate for the ultimate benefit of the art therapy profession and, by June of the same year, The Red Pencil was registered in Singapore.

AL: *What were the most important factors that contributed to the initial development of The Red Pencil?*

LV: What made us more public is our promotional video and our website. Those two things somehow brought us more in the public eye. We also asked for official charity status in Singapore. We started immediately to do work that was really well-received everywhere. One of the very first initiatives was to approach KK hospital, which is the largest hospital for children in Singapore, and they liked the idea.

We found a generous sponsor who accepted to do the sponsorship for that full-time art therapy service at KK Hospital. It is the Red Pencil that is officially the sponsor for those kinds of projects but in the background we have generous donors who believe in what we are doing.

AL: *Can you explain the charitable foundation system in Singapore?*

LV: After we received the initial charity status, we requested the second step of this process, which is the 'Institute of Public Character'. Any donation where the beneficiaries are in Singapore gets a 250 percent tax rebate. It is an interesting scheme, not only because people are more willing to donate, but also because it means that, being governed by the Singapore Ministry of Social and Family Development, all accounts are checked and audited. Which means that all your procedures are clean and every single cent that someone donates is really used for the benefit of the children and totally in line with the mission of The Red Pencil.

AL: *I'm interested in the relationship with the Red Cross. Could you talk about how you established that, and what it looks like now?*

LV: As part of our international development, I thought that it would be good to work closely with an organisation which is well-organised and acts fast in a situation of emergency, and that it really made sense to bring art therapy as part of their psychosocial support to families affected by natural disasters. So some people introduced us to each other and the relationship developed well and fast. So when there is an emergency, I am the one to go with the first assessment medical team, to see on the ground what can be done, if anything can be done,

depending on the situation of course. Right after, we include a number of art therapists with each intervention team to work with the children and the families.

We also do work with the Singapore Red Cross in Singapore because they have a Red Cross Home for the Disabled where there are people who are physically and mentally challenged and where art therapy can really help.

AL: So I understand that the Singapore Red Cross also invites art therapists to do their basic trauma training?

LV: The partnership between the Singapore Red Cross and The Red Pencil has grown ever more professional over the years. They are now organising basic training in terms of what you really need to know logistically as well as psycho-social training, before they can go on the ground. Just because you are an art therapist does not mean that you can easily go into those situations. It's a different situation to work in a high school here in Singapore and going into a devastated place where you get the shock of what you see and the devastation of people. It gives a chance for the Red Cross to assess the people willing to go for such difficult situations.

AL: That makes a lot of sense. I read somewhere that you are in many different Asian countries, is that right?

LV: Yes it goes very fast, we have projects in Japan, China, Nepal, India, Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, and then, Australia and New Zealand!

AL: Yes. I wanted to talk to you about that! Because I do have my own interest in establishing stronger links between Australia/New Zealand and Asia/Pacific, I organised the Asia/Pacific panel and invited you to present as part of that. I was very impressed with the video you showed and your explanation about the work you are doing. We both had the same reaction to the bushfires happening at the time of the conference in Sydney. It was very distressing and embarrassing to me that ANZATA didn't have an organised response as arts therapists to go and assist with something

that was happening right there and affecting so many of the conference attendees directly. I was determined to see what we could learn from what you have already established. And I would like you to talk about what happened at your end about that.

LV: When one of The Red Pencil donors heard that there is a traumatic situation in Australia due to the bush fires, they decided to provide some funding just for this particular project. So when the donation for Australia came, you as the President of ANZATA and I started talking to each other. What I needed was ANZATA's help to identify someone in Australia, and also in New Zealand [in the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquakes] that could take the leadership to organise pilot projects to bring art therapy to the affected communities. Someone who can contact the agencies, contact the art therapists, and also make the link with Faber-Castell who is an official partner for The Red Pencil.

AL: So it is like a seeding funding and creating an awareness of art therapy?

LV: Yes, the Foundation will be there until art therapy is recognised in Singapore and elsewhere. We have to find the right balance between being there for them, doing the best work we can in the most professional way and also understanding that we are there to create the awareness and hope that other mechanisms inside organisations will find a way to create their own funding to welcome an art therapist.

AL: Do you work with adults as well as children and families, and include the other arts therapy modalities?

LV: Yes, we do work with adults and families as well as corporate organisations; we also bring the other types of expressive arts therapies (music therapy and dramatherapy).

AL: I was interested to read about how the name of The Red Pencil came about because originally I thought that it was based on the Red Cross but this is not the case?

LV: There is actually no link between the two names, some people might think so, but it is not the case. The name of The Red Pencil came because pencil is easily a symbol for

children, and in the general literature of art therapy, red can mean at the same time anger and also love, and in a healing process, there is a time for anger that needs to be validated, and then a time for love. After that, when I met the Secretary-General of the Red Cross, with humour he said, “The Red Cross and The Red Pencil, I think we were meant to meet!”

AL: So you think there was something synchronistic about it?

LV: Apparently this gentleman gave a talk about psychosocial support being the next thing they wanted to bring into the Red Cross. I didn't go to this conference but someone three weeks after that talk said, “That is really amazing what you are doing and I think you should meet the Secretary-General of the Singapore Red Cross”. They put us in touch and so started the collaboration between The Red Cross and The Red Pencil.

AL: I read that The Red Pencil are also providing scholarships for the education of art therapists in the region?

LV: Providing support for education through bursaries, scholarship and research opportunities was there right from the start. We have two types of scholarships – one aims to help Singapore candidates financially to become fully graduated art therapists. Also part of our mission is to bring some eligible candidates from the wider Asian region to LASALLE [College of the Arts], to be trained at the proper level, and to be dispatched back into the region so that the new graduates can

practice with children and families in their own country of origin, in their own language and culture, and also organise seminars and conferences to spread the good word about art therapy.

AL: The final thing I wanted to talk about is my observation that Singapore has been a particularly conducive environment to start something like The Red Pencil, because firstly you have the ability in such a relatively small society to make those links and connections and to become visible, and then also because you are in such a central place geographically to reach out to other countries. It feels somehow that there's something significant about you starting The Red Pencil in Singapore.

LV: Singapore is fertile soil – it is also clean soil at the same time. So when you bring a project, with the best intention of your heart of course, and somehow the system believes in it, then [the system] is right behind you. Also, Singapore being located in a region where some countries are still fragile, politically not so stable, you need that strength and stability that Singapore represents, with people of integrity. There is also a challenge and that is the number of art therapists we have currently in Singapore and that needs to grow in order to sustain the work we are doing in Singapore and overseas. This being said, being geographically small, Singapore also fosters ideas of collaboration, rather than competition, to multiply the effect of whatever work is being done. Singapore is a very intelligent country, in so many areas.



Figure 1. Child from a Singapore Red Cross mobile clinic, right after Typhoon Haiyan, November 2013.



Figure 2. The Red Pencil art therapists, along with the Singapore Red Cross, in the Albuera Municipality, the Philippines, June 2014.