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RENOWNED ARTIST RAY MATERSON RECEIVES INNOVATORS AWARD, WILL CREATE “ARTIST IN RESIDENCE” PROGRAM FOR TROUBLED TEENS

In Recovery From Addiction Himself, Materson Hopes Art Will Help Youth with Substance Abuse Problems Rebuild Their Self-Esteem

(Princeton, NJ, July 23, 2003) – Raymond Materson believes in the healing power of art. While serving a 15-year prison sentence for drug-related crimes, he salvaged the thread of worn socks to create miniature tapestries depicting life outside prison walls and used needlepoint to stitch his life back together. Under such conditions, his art was both an escape and an act of courage.

Today, Materson uses his art and his experience as a recovering addict to help troubled youth transform their lives. A celebrated artist whose painstakingly embroidered scenes typically measure a mere two and 1/4-by-two and 3/4 inches, Materson is Program Director of Pregnancy Prevention, HIV Education/Parenting Programs at the Berkshire Farm Center and Services for Youth in Canaan, New York, a residential placement and treatment facility for troubled adolescents and young men.

Materson’s art has garnered him national recognition. Now, it has also won him The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Innovators Combating Substance Abuse award – the first time this honor has been given to someone working in the arts. With the help of the Innovators award grant, Materson plans to create an artist in residence program for Berkshire Farm youth. The program will use drama, poetry, music and the visual arts to imbue self-esteem, teach problem-solving skills and serve as an outlet for self-expression.

Pathway to Addiction and Incarceration

Born into a troubled family, Materson experimented with alcohol and drugs as a young student in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He dropped out of high school but eventually earned a G.E.D. and attended Thomas Jefferson College, where he enjoyed life as a drama and philosophy major but also descended into drug addiction. In his junior year, he was introduced to cocaine. “That absolutely changed my life,” he says. “I became a junkie literally overnight. That was the demon.”

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Ray Materson/ 2

To support his habit, he begged, borrowed and stole. He managed to quit drugs for a short time (eight months) and found work as a counselor in a half-way house and as a waiter. But life changed for the worse when he was reintroduced to cocaine. To support his renewed habit, he drained his bank account and committed a string of robberies using a toy gun he shoplifted from a department store. The robberies netted him \$350, barely enough to buy drugs that would last a day.

Materson was eventually arrested, attempted escape, and was sentenced to 15 years in prison for kidnapping with a firearm. He landed in a state penitentiary in Connecticut, where he would eventually transform and mend himself, using a sewing needle instead of a hypodermic needle.

Art As Redemption

In prison, Materson said, “Doors didn’t open. I was reminded of all the things that were special to me – baseball, school plays, football games.” Materson prayed for a change. To escape the monotony of prison life, he prepared to “attend” the upcoming Rose Bowl game in Pasadena, California – at least in spirit -- watching on television and cheering as if he were in the stadium alongside thousands of University of Michigan fans. Materson spotted a pair of socks with Michigan’s school colors, maize (yellow) and blue stripes, belonging to another inmate. He bartered for the socks, buying them with a pack of cigarettes, then unraveled the sock threads. Fashioning a hoop out of the top of a plastic bowl and a snap-on lid, he set out to embroider a Michigan “M,” winding the thread around the barrel of a pen. He sat on his prison bunk, remembering his grandmother, Hattie, sewing in her rocker on the porch. Two days later, he was ready to attach his “M” to the bill of a visor cap he had made from scraps of cloth and the elastic waistband of a pair of boxer shorts.

The “magical Michigan cap” drew attention and many fellow inmates soon requested embroidery work. The first order Materson filled was for five Puerto Rican flags, each two and a half by three inches, for which he was paid five cartons of cigarettes. He went on to make Italian and Confederate flags, sports logos, and finally tried his hand at French Impressionism, reproducing an image from a book, as well as a series of scenes from Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Along the way, he discovered that embroidering transformed him, allowing him to “escape” for hours at a time as he concentrated on his miniature works of art. It also quelled his desire for drugs smuggled into prison. He realized he was mending himself, as he symbolically unraveled socks and stitched them into new creations.

On the Road to Renown

Materson eventually exhibited his art in a traveling folk art show and sold several pieces – even though he was still incarcerated. A friend of his sister became a fan of his work, wrote to him, and eventually became his agent. A romance developed, and they married in 1993, while Materson was still in prison. He continued working on his art, eventually earning the attention of the Associated Press, which did an article about him and his work that drew letters from people nationwide.

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Materson also began producing images from his past, including scenes from the life of a drug addict. One, entitled “Don’t Get Pulled In,” depicted a terrified addict being sucked into a syringe. The piece made a powerful impression on Materson’s 6-foot, 4-inch, 300-pound cellmate, a murderer with a history of drug abuse. The piece was used in an anti-drug poster by the state of Connecticut. By this time, articles on Materson’s art also began appearing in national media including *Sports Illustrated* and *The New York Times*.

Released from prison on May 2, 1995, Materson began a new life of art and rehabilitation. He used his own personal story of addiction and recovery to give hope to others, particularly to troubled youth. He is now a sober and faithful husband and father, an acclaimed counselor and youth mentor, respected lecturer, published author, and a revered visual artist.

Materson spends 40 to 60 hours of steady work to create each piece, many of which contain 1,200 stitches per square inch. Art, he says, has changed him. “I think that my art form has become a very dear friend to me,” he says. “And I’ve collected a lot of socks.”

Materson’s work has been exhibited in museums nationwide. It is currently on display at New York City’s American Folk Art Museum and is a prominent part of “High on Life: Transcending Addiction” at the American Visionary Art Museum (AVAM) in Baltimore – the nation’s first art exhibit devoted to addiction and substance abuse. The AVAM exhibit, which runs through August 31, 2003, has the largest single grouping of Materson’s artworks ever assembled.

Materson has won many awards since leaving prison, including a special opportunity stipend from the Arts Center for the Capital Region, in Troy, New York, and a fellowship from the New York Foundation for the Arts. He served as artist in residence at the Residential College of the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, home of the Wolverines who inspired him to create his first artwork. He continues to lecture around the country to gifted students and to church groups as well as to troubled youth and to inmates in county jails and state penitentiaries.

In 2002, Materson’s life story was published by Algonquin Books. *Sins and Needles: A Story of Spiritual Mending* was coauthored by Materson and his wife, Melanie, a writer, artist and musician. A story of triumph over adversity and drug addiction, the book, which is dedicated to their children, is illustrated with more than 50 reproductions of Materson’s artwork.

Using Art to Help Troubled Teens

Materson plans to use the Innovators grant to help troubled youngsters who have an interest in art to develop their artistic ability, whether in painting, embroidery, photography, poetry, or the performing arts. He intends to assemble a body of his own work that addresses the issue of substance abuse and develop a traveling art show that will be put on display in schools, churches, museums, prisons, among other venues. The show will help build the artists’ self-esteem, Materson said. “Scientists suggest a particularly negative self-representation among substance-dependent individuals. Therefore, treatment should also include facilitating shifts to a more preferred view of the self.”

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Ray Materson/ 4

He added, "I was an ex-con. But I also have a preferred identity: artist, author. With the Innovators award, I want to help give these kids an identity that says, 'I'm something.'"

Innovators Combating Substance Abuse is a national program of The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation that recognizes and rewards those who have made substantial, innovative contributions of national significance in the field of substance abuse. Each award includes a grant of \$300,000, which is used to conduct a project over a period of up to three years that advances the field. The program addresses problems related to alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs, through education, advocacy, treatment and policy research and reform at the national, state and local levels. The Innovators program is run by a national program office at The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

For additional information on the Innovators Combating Substance Abuse program, please visit the Web site: www.SAInnovators.org. For a complete press kit, please visit <http://newsroom.mbooth.com/sainnovators/>.

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NOTE TO LOCAL EDITORS: Raymond Materson is a resident of Wynantskill, NY.