



**PHASE 2**

# Collective Painting

## notice, observe, and feel

Art is meant to be felt, not just seen. Allow your own background, experiences, and intersecting identities to shape how you engage with each painting. At your own pace, notice, observe, and feel.

Next to the booklet's page numbers you'll find quotes from HEAL project participants. We invite you to pause and reflect on their meaning. Consider your own responses, and let them guide your journey through the exhibition.



What colours stand out to you?



What symbols or images catch your eye?

What does the painting make you feel?



If the painting had soundscape, what sound might you hear?



What questions come to mind when viewing (or looking at) the painting?



Does the painting remind you of any personal experiences or memories?

# Contents

4

Overview

8

A Portal to Us,  
Peaceful Meadow

14

Healing Goba  
Mountains

9

Imperfect  
Togetherness,  
Landscapes of Love

16

Storytellers,  
Sunshine After  
the Rain

12

Blessings of Legacy

18

Coming Together,  
Journeys of Love



Collective HEAL painting in progress.

## Overview

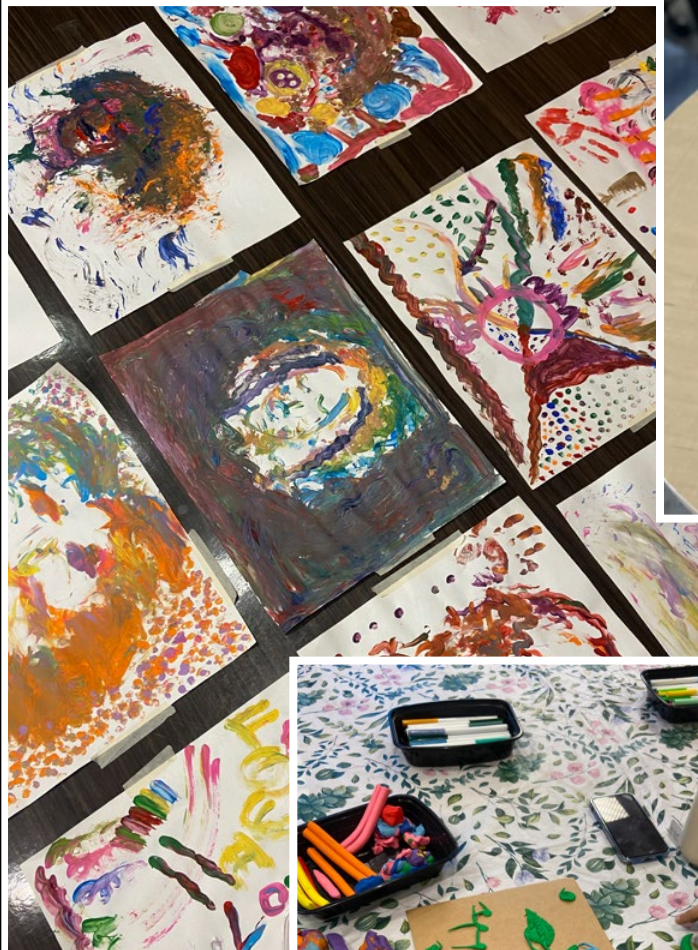
In 2022, Access Alliance Multicultural Health and Community Services (Access Alliance) embarked on a multi-year project funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada. Over four years, Hubs of Expressive Arts for Life (HEAL) Project gathered more than 50 newcomer women to connect, create, learn, imagine, and engage in a 12-session program to improve their mental health and well-being. The HEAL project was designed to prevent and address family violence using expressive arts as the foundational approach.

Alongside a interdisciplinary team of artists, healthcare, and settlement workers, the HEAL program was implemented across six distinct newcomer communities.

Participants in each group engaged in artful collaboration to produce two collective paintings. Each painting showcased a culmination of participants' lived experiences, thoughts, feelings, and attitudes.

This gallery booklet features six collective paintings produced by Phase II HEAL program groups including: 2SLGBTQI+, those with shelter experience, and Tigrinya-speaking newcomer women survivors of gender-based domestic violence. This is a glimpse into the transformative power of art as an approach to mental well-being, knowledge, and skills development.

Come along with us to explore the symbols and stories shared on these canvases.



(Top left) Bilateral (painted with both hands) self-portraits by HEAL participants.

(Bottom left) Participant's clay sculpture showing growth.



(Top right) Participants' nest building activity.

(Bottom right) Participants display their identity-themed sculptures.





(Top left) Participants contribute to collective painting.  
 (Top right) Preparing a Buna ceremony—for gathering and discussion—on the Access Alliance green roof.  
 (Bottom right) Tigrinya participant sharing details about collective painting.  
 (Bottom left) Participant clay sculpture showing growth.



*Tigrinya participants working on collective painting.*


## Preventing and addressing family violence by promoting mental health and well-being

Newcomers experiencing gender-based domestic violence often face unique challenges that can hinder their ability to seek help. The trauma of violence can lead to mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Many newcomers may feel isolated, unsupported, stigmatized, unfamiliar legal systems, and fear preventing them from reaching out for help.

Ample research and literature have confirmed that, in addition to psychotherapeutic healing effects, expressive arts groups can provide survivors with skills for healing. Art serves as a powerful tool for trauma recovery. Engaging in artistic activities can support healing by fostering self-discovery and resilience. It can help individuals process their trauma and build confidence. These are not just paintings, but an avenue to share the lived realities of newcomer survivors of gender-based and/or community violence.



# A Portal to Us, Peaceful Meadow


  
 sherbourne
   
 HEALTH
   
**Sherbourne Health**
  
 2SLGBTQI+ HEAL GROUP

*All text on this page were provided anonymously by participants of the 2SLGBTQI+ HEAL group.*



The **eye** represents future thinking. A reminder to embrace diverse perspectives and to challenge our understanding, leading to inspiration. The eye is about broadening views to uncover new horizons.



**Purple flowers** represent me as a child. Now I am more drawn to black because of my personal journey. These flowers remind me of my growth and blooming, embracing the process of discovering my “why”.



The group of **colourful people** represents togetherness, love, and community. It highlights the beauty in our differences. When we unite, we can achieve great things like positive change.



The **colourful petal flower** illustrates the unique energy of everybody in the group, like our own village of people. It represents a sense of safety and calmness creating a sense of home and connection that is difficult to express.



**Small flowers** represents encouragement I feel when someone believes in me. I feel I can accomplish what I once thought was impossible. I look forward to the new us and hope it impacts all our futures.



The **colourful lined flower** represents a place where people look out into the big world and witness the colours of the sky. The lines create a web of connection that brings joy, peace, and things working together.



**notice, observe, and feel**  
 What colours stand out to you?

# Imperfect Togetherness, Landscapes of Love

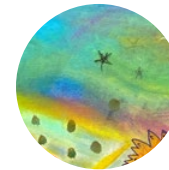
Sherbourne Health
   
 2SLGBTQI+ HEAL GROUP

*All text on this page were provided anonymously by participants of the 2SLGBTQI+ HEAL group.*


  
 sherbourne
   
 HEALTH



This **landscape** symbol represents air, land, water, and trees under the sun from the Earth, reminding us that we are also part of nature. Nature provides us with fortunes and gifts that enrich our lives.



The **sky colours** reveal openness to newness. When I was uncertain about myself, someone else encouraged and believed in me. The sky is watching everyone in this colourful place of peace and joy.



The **sunshine** represents love as a constant force that shines brightly despite witnessing people’s challenging stories. It is about unity, love, sharing, and connection. The sun welcomes everyone here.



The **umbrella** symbolizes safety that we all created together under one protecting force. It is a feeling that is difficult to put into words.



**Little people** represent the group coming together as wild and joyful. They live in a relaxing, perfect, and beautiful village with everyone’s distinct energy.



**notice, observe, and feel**  
 What symbols or images catch your eye?

# Blessings of Legacy



## Art + Health

### TIGRINYA-SPEAKING HEAL GROUP

All text on this page were provided anonymously by participants of the Tigrinya-speaking HEAL group.



In the Orthodox religion, **hands** symbolize blessings and convey the message, “Whatever you step on may be good.” This highlights the significance of faith and positive intentions.



**Cultural dresses** are often handmade by mothers and passed down through generations. This attire holds deep significance, reflecting the values and traditions of the families that wear it.



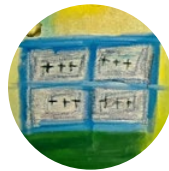
**Coffee** symbolizes the joy of sharing meals and bringing people together. Coffee is traditionally served in a clay pot to represent celebration and connections in these special moments.



The **Ethiopian Buna coffee ceremony** is a cultural tradition where coffee is roasted, ground, and brewed in front of guests. It symbolizes respect and hospitality, fostering community connection through conversation and celebration.



**Ethiopian rose**, also known as the Abyssinian rose, is a beautiful and vibrant flower that blooms once a year in Ethiopia’s highlands. Its striking colours and rarity make it a symbol of resilience and beauty, deeply rooted in the country’s cultural heritage.



**Traditional crosses** remind me of words such as hope, happiness, forgiveness, love, and positivity. It celebrates themes of healing, generosity, and the spirit of upcoming holidays.



## notice, observe, and feel

What does the painting make you feel?

# Healing Goba Mountains

Art + Health

TIGRINYA-SPEAKING HEAL GROUP



All text on this page were provided anonymously by participants of the Tigrinya-speaking HEAL group.



**Ashenda** is a religious holiday celebrated after a 16-day fast, where young women dress up, style their hair, and embrace the possibility of engagement. This festive occasion coincides with blooming flowers and the arrival of the new year.



These **line drawings** remind me of monasteries in our home country. The architecture is similar and looks like sacred spaces. The familiarity in the design makes me feel connected to our cultural heritage.



The **Goba mountains** symbolize strength, power, and confidence. These mountains showcase the determination required to survive and thrive in harsh conditions. Villagers trek up and down the mountain, gathering food to feed the community.



The “New Year” celebration: I drew a **vase and flowers** to show change. Flowers are used to mark the passage of time and welcome new opportunities during the New Year festivities.



The **religious image** reminds me of the items we use in church, particularly the pitcher of water, which symbolizes renewal. It is a significant part of the religious rituals representing cleansing and starting fresh.



The words mean **saalem** or **peace**. They also hold a sense of calmness and positivity that resonates with me deeply.



**notice, observe, and feel**

If the painting had soundscape, what sound might you hear?

# Storytellers, Sunshine After the Rain



**Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic**  
SHELTER EXPERIENCE HEAL GROUP

All text on this page were provided anonymously by participants of the shelter experience HEAL group.



I went through a dark phase in my life where I was so broken that it was hard to look at myself in the mirror, affecting my **self-esteem**. My friend reminded me of my worth and the responsibility—it helped me find strength to heal and move forward.



A **small tree** with deep roots represents the wonderful people that I've met along this journey and learned so much from. Though I still struggle to accept that it wasn't my fault, I know this will be a lifelong journey of growth and healing.



I realize that I can bloom into a **beautiful flower** by learning from my experiences and using the knowledge I've gained. While the journey isn't easy, if I push myself to heal and rebuild, I could become a light in the world.



The **crowns** remind me that there's nothing wrong with me, I have the potential to become a queen. I am learning to embrace self-love and personal growth.



The **crying woman** represents the loneliness I felt from being let down by many people in my life. Now, I am reminded that my struggles are not unique and that I am not alone in my experiences.



The **window** symbolizes my journey of moving from a confined space, where obedience limited my sense of identity. It represents both the ability to observe my past without being bound by it and the freedom to look forward.



The **box** represents suppression of unique parts of my identity. But now, I'm witnessing a new dawn, embracing my true self, and stepping into a future of security. I am no longer wandering; I am confident in who I am.



## notice, observe, and feel

What questions come to mind when viewing (or looking at) the painting?







# The act of making art brings together experiences in new and imaginative ways.

## Acknowledgements

Our deepest gratitude goes to the HEAL program participants who generously shared their stories and creative expressions, now reflected in these collective paintings. We also extend heartfelt thanks to our art-based facilitators, whose guidance and care fostered the safe and trusting spaces that made this work possible.

## Partner organizations

Sherbourne Health  
Art + Health  
Barbra Schlifer Commemorative Clinic

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