

From Within: emotional healing through art

by Searlina Bodden

At the recent opening of *From Within* at the National Gallery, visitors to the exhibition took in a colourful feast for the eyes and mind – wild abstracts and mind-opening poetry.

To the sensitive eye, the emotional forces behind them – fear, pain, hopelessness – are palpable. For more than five weeks artists Tony Crosbie, April ending and National Gallery Director Leslie Bigelman have given the troubled people of the Cayman community a voice and it is at a fever pitch.

Mr. Crosbie, who recently exhibited the powerful and telling *Viva Cuba* photographic retrospective at the National Gallery, has taken a hands-on approach to emotional healing – accessing his own troubled background to relate to the troubled individuals of the community – through art.

Assisted by Ms Bending and Ms Bigelman, the Irish artist has developed a programme whereby prison inmates and residents of the local girl's and boy's homes attend weekly art classes. They learn the basic fundamentals of painting, drawing

and true self expression.

"What we are trying to do is show these people that through creativity change is possible. We are giving them a platform to be heard," he said.

The essential difference in this approach to therapy is the radical change in dynamics from being told things and being asked, Mr. Crosbie says. The troubled men and women are not accustomed to talking out their emotional pains and urges. The key, he says, is in relating to them on a human level.

"We know we are coming from the same place," he says.

This "place" is a background of violence and addiction. Mr. Crosbie grew up in Dublin, Ireland, and from a young age was escaping his troubled home life by experimenting with drugs. A violent adolescence led to a troubled first marriage and more drug use. He said he has been "in recovery" for 10 years. Not cured – in recovery.

"When you're an addict or you're violent because of a bad background, it's a day at a time," he says. "You're never cured. It's all about how you deal with it."

"Dealing", according to Ms Bending, is exactly what local troubled teens are not taught. They, therefore, grow into frustrated, violent adults.

"The main thing in our lives is how we express ourselves and rid our minds of negativity," she said. "If you don't, it just piles up and rots. If people are able to talk about

their problems – not necessarily getting advice but just clearing the air – it helps decrease their frustration level."

Having pioneered both the Inside Art and Art Zone programmes in the last two years, Ms Bending is familiar with the process of purging negative urges through art and she says the results speak for themselves.

"According to the staff and inmates of the prison, they are just more peaceful and calm and a lot less frustrated, she says, "It's still not a pleasant place to be, but they are handling it better."

Working on such an intimate level with troubled individuals can also pose its complications. According to Gallery Di-

rector Leslie Bigelman one of these is the urge to want to "save people".

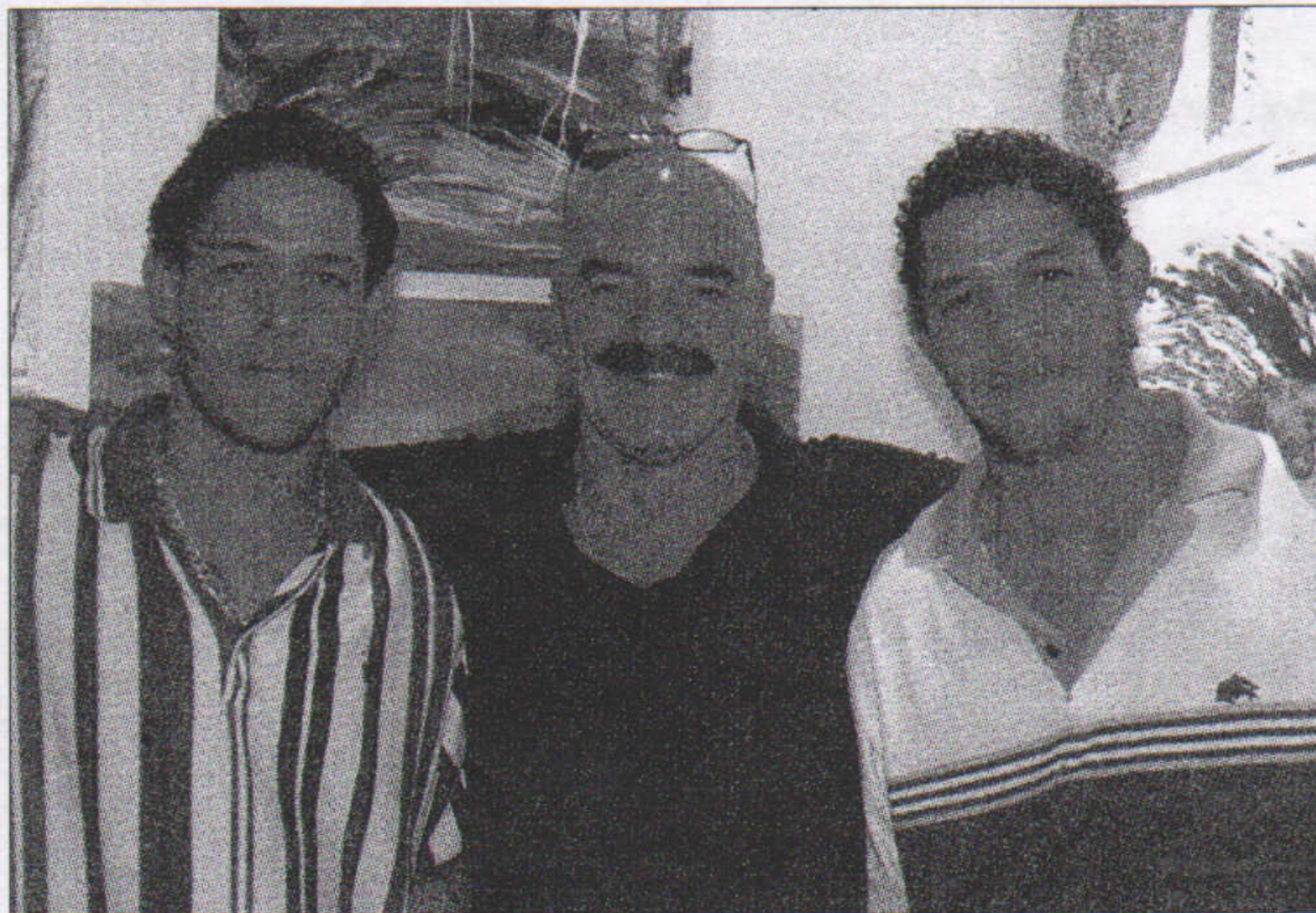
"How can you help but want to help these people? They're frightened and alone. That's the hard part for me. This one didn't have breakfast – well, I want to be at their house the next evening with a plate of food," she says.

Although Mr. Crosbie leaves this week to return to Ireland, Ms Bigelman hopes to continue the programme and possibly bring the artist back for another term of these healing art classes.

"I hope people realise how valuable this work has been. It would almost be worse to start this process and then take it away," she says.

Right now the programme is sponsored jointly by the prison, local law firm Walkers, State Street, and Rotary. The National Gallery provided the supplemental funding.

"The pain and anguish these kids are going through is so much deeper than people know," Ms Bigelman concluded. "They live here. They belong to us and we need to help them."



Irish artist Tony Crosbie with student artists Adroy Ebanks (left) and Adrian Ebanks at the opening of *From Within*. The exhibitions of local works produced in workshops led by Crosbie are on display at the National Gallery. Photo: Jenny Gabruch