How one Connecticut mom is using art to tackle addiction stigma

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Recovery flags created by participants in the Remember Love Recovery Project. Photo courtesy Patricia Bode

By Brianna Wallen | Southern Connecticut State University

On a cold December night, Laura Chomentowski, a retired social worker, gathered with two other bereaved mothers around her small dining room table in Hamden as Patricia Bode arrived in her Toyota Prius with her mobile studio.

They were there for an art project: decorating small fabric banners called recovery flags, each carrying a story of loss, resilience and recovery. Waving in the breeze, the flags stand as a reminder of a harsh reality: addiction remains one of the most misunderstood health conditions in America.

Chomentowski lost her son in 2020 to an accidental drug overdose. Creating recovery flags with the three other mothers, including Bode, each of whom had lost sons the same way, turned the evening into a space of shared understanding.

“There’s a lot of guilt we feel as moms that this happened to our kids,” Chomentowski said, “and you look around the table and see three other really great moms.”

Addressing stigma through art

For Bode, an associate professor of art at Southern Connecticut State University, changing the narrative around substance abuse became a personal mission after the accidental overdose death of her son, Ryan Moriarty, in 2018.

Through the Remember Love Recovery Project, Bode has used her loss to launch a healing movement that has stretched across Connecticut and beyond.

“Our mission is to destigmatize addiction disorder through art, education and human connection,” Bode said.

Participants create flags for the project. Beside them on the table are Narcan overdose recovery kits. Photo courtesy Patricia Bode

According to the nonprofit Shatterproof Addiction, nearly 49 million Americans aged 12 or older experienced a substance use disorder within the past year.

Despite the widespread impact of addiction, stigma continues to stand as one of the greatest barriers to recovery.

The group's 2024 Addiction Stigma Index Report found that 57% of the public believe a person living with substance abuse disorder is not trustworthy. These attitudes can discourage individuals from seeking treatment, isolate families and prevent communities from addressing the addiction crisis.

"Our goal is to raise consciousness about how important recovery is, and how we need to support people, and to build compassion for those in recovery," Bode said. "And using art to do that and also allowing art to be a pathway to support those individuals who are engaging in [other] recovery tools."

Bode said the Remember Love Recovery Project was inspired by what she believes was the message her son left behind.

Moriarty's work as an artist, musician and T-shirt designer featured the phrase "Remember Love," which became the root of the project's mission to reduce stigma surrounding addiction and foster human connection.

"We knew we wanted to do something that generated the energy and the thought of what it means to remember love," Bode said.

Bode has led workshops in 15 states, bringing the program to community centers, museums, correctional facilities and transitional housing centers. Through partnerships with schools nationwide, Bode uses the recovery flag project to encourage discussions about addiction, empathy and prevention while working alongside school clinicians.

Patricia Bode (center) and two SCSU alumnae who collaborate in the project. Melissa Villa (left) graduated in May 2026 with her MAT / Master of Arts in Teaching in Art Education. Arianna Alamo (right) is the art teacher at a Common Ground High School. Photo courtesy Patricia Bode

“It’s unusual for kids to be able to make art about something like this in schools,” Bode said. “It’s way beyond the ‘just say no’ programs of the past.”

After becoming a nonprofit organization in 2025, the Remember Love Recovery Project is preparing for its next chapter as Bode plans to transition from her university teaching career to managing the project full time.

Art movements aimed at healing

While the project continues to expand across communities and institutions, Bode also acknowledged that its role has limits.

“We’re not clinicians, and we’re very clear about that,” Bode said. “We are a means to be connected to recovery, and we are a means to support recovery.”

Bode also emphasized the initiative is centered on art and community, it can not encompass every aspect of addiction recovery on its own.

“There’s a lot of steps to recovery that we cannot address,” Bode said.

Still, art can help. Other nonprofits dealing with recovery have used similar programs. For example, an Indiana nonprofit, Overdose Lifeline, launched “De-Stigmatize: Healing Through Art,” this year to shed light on the role of creative expression in recovery.

Over the course of eight weeks, participants worked with artists and therapists who used creative activities to help them explore their experiences, express themselves and support their healing journeys.

Nationally, the Art Pharmacy movement is promoting what it calls a social prescribing initiative: integrating arts and cultural experiences into healthcare to address mental health challenges and social isolation. The program is building a network to connect healthcare providers with

local arts organizations, allowing those providers to prescribe activities like museum visits, theater performances, and art workshops to patients.

Art Pharmacy is currently active in 12 states including Connecticut.

Recovery flags

Bode said the idea for recovery flags came to her as posters of her son's artwork swayed in the wind.

"When they were hanging on the clothesline in our backyard, I said, 'Oh, they remind me of prayer flags from the Buddhist tradition, and I got the idea: what if we made something called recovery flags?" Bode said.

Bode said her vision for the Remember Love Recovery Project was also shaped by her experience as a young art teacher helping with the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt.

Through seeing how art sparked conversation and challenged the stigma surrounding AIDS, Bode said she was inspired to create a similar approach to address the stigma around substance use disorder.

"I saw social thought change in our country," Bode said. "If we could destigmatize and raise consciousness at local levels, and eventually at the national level, that would be an aspirational goal."

The flags often feature hopeful messages that relate to the creator's experiences.

Today, participants are able to breathe life into their artwork by transforming a 9-by-12 inch banner into their own recovery flag.

The initiative has created more than 4,000 recovery flags, with about half donated to the project's collection.

"We hang them at the different places we go, whether it's on a city street for an arts festival or in a museum, and people report that they're

moved by just looking at them and understanding the story," Bode said.

Chomentowski and the other mothers in that winter Hamden gathering donated their flags to Bode's collection.

"The feeling of being part of a project and knowing that your little flag, your little piece of creativity, and that our sons could be represented to something bigger that we all believe in," Chomentowski said, "which is to end the stigma."

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