

# A WORLD OF HURT

## Exhibit features emotionally disturbed children

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The Southern Illinoian

The haunting images loom over viewers like specters.

Stephen Chalmers has captured a world few people see. The silhouettes belong to severely emotionally disturbed children who are in residential treatment.

"Before I came to graduate school, I worked with several emotionally disturbed children in Oregon," Chalmers said. "Here, I drive to St. Louis and volunteer."

An exhibition of Chalmers' portraits, titled "Imprints and Impressions," can be seen at the 1101 Gallery, in the Southern Illinois University at Carbondale Communications Building in Room 1101, through May 15. A company in St. Louis provided materials for the project, and Carbondale Blueprint did the processing.

Because the children are in treatment, they must remain anonymous. Because only their silhouettes can be seen, Chalmers' technique is perfect for capturing their images.

Each child is surrounded by treasured objects of his or her own choice.

"This child's favorite possession is a pen," Chalmers said. "This young woman wants to be a writer when she grows up, so her pen is very important to her."

Another child has action figures at his feet. Still other treasure pendants, or objects from nature.

Despite their problems, these children obviously treasure kid things. One boy was pictured with his beloved Walkman.



**Showman:** Award winning student photographer Stephen Chalmers is shown with samples of his work, on exhibit at SIUC's Communications Building through May 15.

The portraits' large size is no accident. "I want them to be intimidating because these children have been intimidated most of their lives," Chalmers said.

Four images hang in the center of the room. These are portraits of children in treatment in Oregon. They range in age from 5 to 8 and are extremely disturbed.

"I worked with the most disturbed children when I was in Oregon," Chalmers said.

The children he works with at Epworth Children and Family Services in Webster Groves, Mo., are adolescents. Their portraits hang on all four walls of the gallery and surround the room.

The images are created with material that usually is used to make blueprints. The child lies on top of the material and is surrounded by the objects, then a blanket is thrown over the top of them.

Many viewers say the images make them stop and think. That's just what Chalmers intended.

"This is a population not seen by most people," he said. "These children are being shuttled off to treatment at age 5. Residential treatment means they are in treatment 24 hours a day."

Most times, treatment lasts until the child is 18. Some of the emotional disorders are traced to abuse and neglect earlier in life, Chalmers said.

"Others are from what seem to be normal families," he said. "Something just went wrong."

Tragically, the future is bleak for most of the children.

"In the United States, there is almost nothing for these people over the age of 18," Chalmers said. "They most likely will end up in jail or a shelter."

When they posed, some children seemed to huddle down to hide, while others appeared to be jumping for joy.

"Some children moved during exposure, making these blurry spots," Chalmers said.

One image was created by having the child stand on the material, casting a shadow.

"That gives this one a ghostly appearance," Chalmers said.

"This girl had just come into treatment," he said of another portrait. "She had been on the street the night before."

Some of the images are creased and wrinkled because of the weight of the child above.

The children enjoyed the project immensely, Chalmers said.

Chalmers is from Louisville, Ky., where he obtained bachelor's degrees in psychology and photography. He now is pursuing a master's degree in photography at SIUC.

Working with disturbed children was not his first career choice.

"After I graduated, I applied for everything I could think of," he said.

There were no jobs in photography, but a job at a treatment center was open.

Chalmers himself was the youngest in his family. "I had never been around children at all," he said.

When he went for an interview, a child was having problems just outside the door.

"He was screaming and kicking the door," Chalmers said. "But I really grew to love the work."

After graduate school, he plans to move to the West Coast and teach photography.

"But I will do continue to do volunteer work with children the rest of my life," he said.