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Raise your cups for mental health

Much of the conversation about mental health focuses on mental illness. But the winner and finalists in South Western Sydney Local Health District's Paint Your Path art competition showed onlookers that there's a lot more to mental wellbeing than living without mental illness.

The winning entry is a sketch by Marianna Ioanou that was inspired by the competition's theme Learn & Grow and will soon be printed and seen on BioPak coffee cups all around Australia.

"I went through a difficult time and art helped me get through that," Ms Ioanou said.

"For me, drawing was a non-judgemental refuge where I could escape through art and discover something about myself along the way.

"My artwork '*Barefoot Forward*' highlights how leaving old comforts in life behind can lead to greener pastures.

"As painful as it may be, sometimes taking different directions can mean you feel the bumps along the road because you haven't travelled it before but it is all part of the growing and learning process which is better than feeling nothing at all.

"A single footstep in the right direction can pave a positive path which will not only lead to the unknown but provide a sense of freedom that comes with leaving old burdens behind," she said.

Elisha Wong's artwork also won praise from the competition judges, scoring her a place in the top five. The inspiration behind the year six student's creative work was her older sister, Emily.

"They say year 12 exams are the hardest things you'll do at school and for my sister, it all boiled down to studying hard and getting the right results in her HSC," Elisha said.

"My sister experienced panic attacks, triggered by anxiety and depression during the HSC this year and I just wanted to remind her through my artwork, that she wasn't alone and had my support.

"Through support we can both learn and grow together to overcome it," she said

The Paint Your Path competition was open to south western Sydney residents who were either living with, had a past history or had a loved one living with mental illness.

SWSLHD Mental Health Service Director Dr Claire Jones said the competition winner and finalists were selected on how well they were able to process their feelings.

"The competition has helped to destigmatise mental illness and we are really proud that the entrants, finalists and winner have contributed in their own way to reshaping how mental illness is perceived," Dr Jones said.

"The healing benefits of art therapy are evident and these benefits are clustered around notions of exploration, expression, release, and the healing process," she said.