

HEALTH

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Seniors paint the portrait of health with art classes

By Colleen Schrapen St. Louis Post-Dispatch Mar 26, 2016



Elaine Ketchelmeier, 91, shows off her watercolor painting of a wintery scene she painted during an evening art class at Sunrise Senior Living in Des Peres on Wednesday, February 17, 2016. Photo By David Carson, dcarson@post-dispatch.com

George Dunlap has arrived to his painting class early. He is the only one sitting at the table.

Dressed in black suspenders and a plaid shirt, he is hunched over a sheet of 5-by-7 inch watercolor paper, using a pencil to meticulously transfer a snowy landscape scene from the teacher's template.

“I’m slow,” Dunlap says as an explanation for his punctuality. He is the newest painter in the group of regulars in Mary Beth Flynn’s class. At 85, he is also the youngest.

Dunlap moved into Sunrise Senior Living of Des Peres in October. He has been taking Flynn’s watercolor class for about six weeks.

Like many of Flynn’s students, Dunlap doesn’t have a background in painting.

“I think I’m still picking it up,” he says as he traces the outline of a hill dotted with evergreens. “You always learn something new, like anything else. I do like it. I enjoy doing it.”

The winter panorama he is preparing to paint is one of dozens Flynn, 57, has created since she launched Artfully Aging in 2009. She had been working part-time as an aide at a senior care center, looking for a way to help others, and “it clicked,” she says.

Flynn, who lives in Wildwood and also owns a house portrait business, started teaching painting a couple of times a month at an adult day care. She enrolled in workshops at the National Center on Creative Aging and with the Alzheimer’s Association.

Now she and another employee juggle about 50 art sessions a month at 30 senior-living communities in the area.

And the demand is likely to continue. The Social Security Administration reports that an average of 10,000 Americans are turning 65 each day; 735,000 people nationwide reside in assisted-living facilities.

According to the Assisted Living Federation of America, creating art helps improve motor and cognition skills in seniors and reduces stress, anxiety and confusion. A Mayo Clinic study conducted last year on people in their mid- to late-80s found that artistic activity had a protective effect on mental sharpness that was even more pronounced than with other healthful habits such as exercise, diet and computer use.

At Sunrise, the watercolor class is part of the “Living with Purpose, Living with Artistry” program for its residents, says activity director Teresa Riley.

“We like to do mind, body and spirit activities every day. The painting class hits all three,” she says. “It develops fine and gross motor skills. They can connect with others in talking about their paintings, and they get fulfillment out of it.”

The group of five painters who have gathered next to Sunrise’s dining area are in the throes of their work. They occasionally pause to compare their paintings and ask questions about shading or how to mix the colors.

Alice Powell, 93, is the oldest painter on this night, though she will only admit to being “over 60.” Powell, a native New Yorker, performed on Broadway. Unlike most of her classmates, she has painting experience, particularly in oils.

“I love painting. I like nature scenes mostly,” says the admitted perfectionist as she examines her progress through gold-rimmed glasses. “It’s easier to do. Portraits are very hard.

“I painted all my life as a hobby. It was a hundred years ago.”

Elaine Ketchelmeier, 91, laughs at Powell’s hyperbole. Ketchelmeier had never really painted before she moved into Sunrise a couple of years ago – “just kid stuff,” she says.

But Flynn’s one-on-one help and peppy encouragement quickly won Ketchelmeier over, and she has been a class regular for more than a year.

Seniors with any level of physical or cognitive ability can create art. “Teaching is about being flexible,” says Flynn. “Meeting people where they are.”

At one end, Flynn might need to hold a painter’s hand, guiding the brushstrokes. Others may just need help tracing the template or mixing colors. And some are more confident and independent, adding their own details to the piece. Regardless, Flynn is nearby, giving reminders, overseeing their progress and praising their work.

As they swab in light blue skies and shadows falling on the snow, the students at Sunrise chat about their day and admire one another’s skills. Ketchelmeier finishes her scene first and waits for the paint to dry.

She compliments Powell on her largest evergreen: “Oh, that’s a good-looking tree. I’d like to decorate that tree.”

They reminisce about skating and sledding escapades from years ago.

Dunlap, as predicted, is the last one still working. "I'm tied up with the fence here," he says, hesitant to continue dabbling at the narrow slats.

"The fence looks almost as old as I am!"

WHERE TO FIND CLASSES

Mary Beth Flynn teaches her Artfully Aging classes at about 30 senior-living communities but will also make house calls or teach at senior centers. Go to artfullyaging.com for more information.

Other organizations that offer art classes for seniors include:

Oasis, a nonprofit devoted to healthy aging: oasisnet.org

Mid-East Area Agency on Aging provides a calendar with classes taught at area senior centers: mid-eastaaa.org

St. Louis Community College offers activities for older adults through its continuing education program: stlcc.edu

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