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Mary Beth Flynn (center) works with Laverone Van Pelts (left) and Dorothy Biggs on an art project at Mari de Villa in Town & Country.

## Local artist taps talents of elderly

By SHEILA FRAYNE RHOADES

Mary Beth Flynn, 52, has spent most of her life creating art. These days, she shares her talents by teaching art to elderly individuals in many West County retirement communities, including Surrey Place, Brooking Park, Cape Albeon, Delmar Gardens, Mari de Villa, and Sunrise Senior Living.

Flynn works with seniors of all skill levels, including those who are independent and those with severe memory loss. She is convinced that at some level, everyone is an artist and that healing can be found in artistic and creative activities.

Flynn holds a bachelor's degree in interior design and for a number of years worked as a commercial designer. In 1995, she began work as a professional artist and developed a nationally recognized house portrait business. During that period, she worked also as a caregiver and became increasingly aware of the need for stimulating activities for seniors. The combination of being an artist and caregiver led her to realize she had the skills and experience to develop and teach art programs for seniors.

Two years ago, Flynn started Artfully Aging, Art Programs for Seniors. She developed a collection of projects that she tailors to the skill level of her various seniors groups.

"They're able to tap into their own creative nature while experiencing both enjoyment and a feeling of accomplishment," Flynn said of the adults with whom she works. "Some seniors have been interested in art throughout their lives and are grateful to have a place to continue their passion, while others may never have held a paintbrush before."

Classes for those with severe memory

loss bring her a special sort of satisfaction.

"Most people with dementia have lost some of their inhibitions, so these art sessions are often full of fun and laughter," Flynn said. "The key is to have zero expectations and never worry about staying within the lines."

Flynn gently engages those with dementia in creative ways, always aiming to make each person feel good.

"I focus on simple motivation to get them to draw by using props like seasonal fruits, flowers, pumpkins and leaves," Flynn said. "The mental stimulation of painting helps in bringing out their creativity."

"Occasionally, with severely disabled participants, a more one-on-one approach is required. ... I guide their hand as they dip their brush in the water and help them to apply the paint strokes. They relax, look at the colors they've selected, and sure enough, smiles appear."

Linda Yoder, social worker and activities director at the Mari de Villa retirement community in Town & Country, said Flynn's technique makes art approachable for everyone.

"Her step-by-step methods are so encouraging," Yoder said. "She definitely has a positive effect." Flynn, working with seniors has been fulfilling, sometimes challenging, but always fun.

"I've experienced firsthand the life-giving benefits which come from engaging in the creative process," she said. "I get immense satisfaction when I look around and see every participant immersed in their painting. Throughout my life I have benefited greatly from my own art, and now I can share this gift with my classes. I think everyone has a creative side, and my goal is to help each participant unleash theirs."