

The Register-Guard

Art helps recall old and discover new at ElderHealth's Art in the Park

By Tatiana Parafiniuk-Talesnick The Register-Guard

Posted Jul 11, 2019 at 5:02 PM

Updated at 9:23 AM

As a live band strummed the beginning of “Walkin’ After Midnight,” Joe Cameron shared one of his cartoon sketches — his part of ElderHealth and Living Memory Village’s Art In The Park showcase.

He paused describing the simple pen-and-paper profile to crack a joke.

“Some of the people around here really do go walking at midnight,” Cameron said.

Cameron, who once worked as a cartoonist for The Boston Globe, is one of many residents at ElderHealth whose art was showcased Wednesday afternoon. Staff and residents at the living facility for seniors with memory loss spent months preparing a gallery to share with family and raise money for the Alzheimer’s Association, a cause close to the ElderHealth community’s heart.

As of 2018, an estimated 65,000 people in Oregon have Alzheimer’s. Most of ElderHealth’s near-100 residents are challenged with Alzheimer’s and all are impacted by some kind of memory loss. While the staff has used music to entertain residents before, art projects offered an engaging and revealing endeavor — one that experts agree can be helpful for people challenged with memory loss.

“Art goes beyond words, it’s a felt experience,” Grace Fletcher, a Eugene art therapist, said.

Art therapy can work different ways — it can be a way for a person to express a feeling, but the act of creating art itself can be the therapy, said Fletcher, who has a background in art and uses art therapy to help clients with a range of challenges, including memory.

“When we’re talking about folks with memory loss, they don’t have a great sense of control over their sense of identity and purpose but in the realm of art they have a lot of control,” Fletcher said.

While some residents, such as Cameron, were empowered to reconnect with a piece of themselves they know already, other residents found something new. One showcased artist, Elsabe Slatin, needed some convincing when she was reminded of the work she did.

“They’re my paintings? They must be terrible,” Slatin said.

To her surprise, two paintings, one a fruit still-life and the other a blue barn, proved otherwise. Slatin wasn’t the only one surprised.

“I’ve never known her to paint,” Mary Winston, Slatin’s daughter, said. “She sometimes refinished furniture.”

Surprise aside, Winston was proud when she first saw the paintings around a year earlier. She framed both paintings for her mom on Mother’s Day and made prints to sell at the show.

While Slatin was uncertain she was the artist behind the work, she said she was enjoying the day in the park. She smiled and looked towards a live band, and then her daughter.

“This place looks *pretty* nice,” Slatin said.

Liz von Wellsheim, the living facility’s co-owner, believes the art projects have a positive impact, no matter if residents can hold on to the memory.

“We call it moments of joy,” von Wellsheim said. “Even if they forget later, they carry that feeling with them.”

The Oregon Supported Living Arts & Culture Program, manages, promotes and sells mixed-ability artists’ work in Eugene, and also espouses the benefits of art for people with memory loss.

“A lot of memories are stored in your body and so just the act of making art brings things from your past, your life experiences, and allows you to just be in that space with who you really are,” said Sterling Israel, a coordinator with

program.

The organization wants to open minds to what it means to be a part of the artist community by combating the physical, mental and financial barriers that leave folks on the outside.

“For some of the people that come here who do have memory issues, they might be more timid in their speech about what they’re capable of,” Israel said. “But when they sit down to create, to draw and paint, to construct a piece, their lifetime of learning is clear.”

One of ElderHealth’s residents demonstrated the resilience of a lifetime of learning through finely painted glassware. While Mary Lee Nash isn’t able to say much these days, her artwork demonstrated extraordinary skill and precision. Her pieces ranged from floral scenes, angelic portraits and fruit still lifes.

“It’s still amazing what she does,” von Wellsheim said.

While the event is the first art showcase for the group, the joy it brought residents, staff and family members makes von Wellsheim think it won’t be the last.

“We got everybody started now they’re never going to stop,” von Wellsheim said.

Follow Tatiana on Twitter [@TatianaSophiaPT](https://twitter.com/TatianaSophiaPT) or email at Tatiana [@registerguard.com](mailto:Tatiana@registerguard.com).