

[Print This Article](#)

Guest House clients relax with one stroke of the brush

Healing Through the Arts program provides creative outlet for seniors

Kelsey Williamson
kwilliamson@gainesvilletimes.com
May 3, 2015

Senior citizen JoAnn Phillips has a hard time remembering. But when the North Georgia woman picks up a brush, dips it into paint and swoops it across paper, she doesn't have to remember. She can just paint.

This small action every other Monday at The Guest House gives Phillips, who suffers from some form of memory loss, a sense of accomplishment and confidence.

"I love to show people what you can do with just a piece of paper," said the regular participant in the new Healing Through the Arts program at Guest House.

Developed through a partnership between the Quinlan Visual Arts Center and The Guest House, the new art program is a way for those dealing with advanced age, memory loss or other health issues to prove to themselves and others they can still create something beautiful.

And the results of clients speak for themselves.

"Whatever you want to do or make, you can do it," said Phillips, adding she frequently expresses herself through art and enjoys the way Healing Through the Arts allows her to be creative and different.

Recently, Phillips worked with watercolors in the classes. But she also has painted and created collages.

"I love color. I like to color it up with the paint to make it yours," she said. "I like using green and yellow because they're different from everybody else."

Phillips is not the only one reaping the benefits of the class. About 12 to 14 people join the class every other Monday at The Guest House off Oak Street in Gainesville.

Relaxing artistry

Every other Monday, a guest artist ventures into The Guest

House to teach clients about art and engage their creative juices, which can ultimately help them relax. The artists topics range from collage to watercolor with a simple theme usually.

The overall goal is not to produce professional art but allow patients with memory loss and other problems an outlet to express themselves.

"Any type of art is extremely therapeutic," said Mary Frances Hull, one of the artists in the program. "It's a peaceful thing to do because you're just expressing something. You're not creating a Rembrandt, but to be able to express something on paper that you can't express verbally, for me it would be such a relief."

Quinlan Executive Director Amanda McClure explained another primary purpose of the program is to simply enhance the lives of the clients at The Guest House, which serves seniors, the elderly, residents with memory loss and other health conditions who need company or care during the day.

About 75 percent of the clients deal with some form of memory loss, McClure said. And the Healing Through the Arts aims to stimulate communication, memory and other senses among The Guest House clients.

"Visual art can trigger dormant memories and emotions, inspiring conversations among these patients who normally struggle to express themselves," McClure said. "We know art stimulates the senses. When dementia patients create the art themselves, that activity stimulates the whole brain. Instead of just responding to images, patients must plan, remember, create patterns and use motor skills."

And even when Guest House clients don't remember the last piece of art they created, they still enjoy making more art, McClure said.

"They are very relaxed and content when they do art," said Debbie Powell, admissions director at The Guest House. "It's inspiring to watch because they will say or think 'I can't do that,' but then they get started and realize they can do it."

Personal connections

The artists — Hull, Joe Emery, Fox Gradin and Patricia Fabian

— who work with Guest House clients are trained to work with those who have Alzheimer's, dementia or other forms of memory loss and health problems. Most of the Healing Through the Arts artists also have personal experiences with loved ones who suffer from one of these health issues.

Hull joined the handful of instructors because it is a cause close to her own heart.

"They were looking for teachers who could sit with patients who have dementia and be understanding, and I jumped right into it because it's in my family," she said.

However, the current group of clients in the Healing Through the Arts class is defying standards about memory loss and the stigmas of Alzheimer's and dementia, surprising at least one instructor.

"This particular group, from what we were trained about people who suffer from dementia and Alzheimer's, isn't quite the same," Hull said. "They are so happy and easygoing and childlike. This particular group at The Guest House is so happy and sweet. They like to be talked to and entertained, and they don't mind being touched. To them, having their hand patted or shoulder touched is healing. But each group is different."

Powell noted the people who spend their days at the center are extremely responsive to the Quinlan artists and are excited about the art programs.

"The clients love to see new faces," she said. "When (the Quinlan artists) come, everybody wants to do it. I've never had anybody not want to participate."

Some artists also are just about as enthusiastic as the clients about developing new art ideas and themes. Each time a new medium, concept or theme is introduced, Guest House clients take simple directions and make the pieces their own.

"(Before Easter) we decided to paint with acrylics," Hull said. "We did Easter bunnies in the grass. And it was challenging and they rose to the challenge."

The clients followed Hull's instructions and used shapes in a zigzag pattern to design the bottom of the painting.

"Then the bunnies started coming through," she said. "And they all had their own personality."

Once the paintings and other projects are complete, the art is displayed in the dining room at The Guest House for all to see.

Phillips said she is proud of her work and enjoys the Healing Through the Arts program as well as working with the instructors.

"They're so gentle," Phillips said. "They want to help you, and they're so giving. I love making art."

Powell noted since the same set of clients participates, they have formed a bond with the artists. That helps since most of the clients suffer from memory loss.

Healing nature

But Healing Through the Arts is not the only program available for Guest House clients. They may participate in pet therapy, music therapy, card games and other activities. Healing Through the Arts, however, uses different mediums and techniques than the everyday activities, introducing a variety of experiences into their daily lives.

Instructors will even introduce other therapeutic methods into the class.

"We will do watercolors with music playing," Powell said. "Sometimes it's like working with kindergartners, but they love the energy and understanding (what) the artists bring."

McClure explained Healing Through the Arts was created with the elderly or senior population in mind as a way to expand the Quinlan's teachings to new audiences.

"We already had elements for children and teens, and one day I realized that there was a broader population here that we were not serving as well," McClure said.

She reached out to similar programs in other cities to foster ideas for Healing Through the Arts. Soon, the "passion project" had concrete ideas and foundations. However, it was still missing funding.

"I just kept going around to different places until I found someone who was willing to take a chance on a program

we had never done before," McClure said.

The North Georgia Community Foundation decided to back the project. Through the funding, supply of donations and volunteers, Healing Through the Arts is offered at no charge to The Guest House.

This money is set to run out in June, however, so Quinlan is sponsoring a program fundraiser May 8.

"Ruthie Fenger, a student from SCAD, is organizing a fundraising reception for Healing Through the Arts as part of her senior thesis," McClure said.

The Quinlan plans to continue looking for funding in various places so Healing Through the Arts can be offered weekly, year-round and at other places. It also hopes to expand the population the therapeutic program serves.

"I think cancer patients going through chemotherapy and radiation could benefit from this as well," McClure said. "Art has this amazing capacity to relax you and provide focus and healing."

Powell agreed the program would benefit a wide range of people, from children to adults, because of art's therapeutic nature.

"I think it could also help those who are mentally challenged or even autistic because it helps people express themselves," she said.

<http://www.gainesvilletimes.com>