

Hampton seniors help decorate state's D.C. tree

By Mike Holtzclaw, Daily Press, November 28, 2017

Amanda Wallace, a Hampton artist, knows first-hand the therapeutic benefits of creativity — and she enjoys passing those benefits on to others.

Last month she worked with almost three dozen residents at the Coliseum Convalescent and Rehabilitation Center in Hampton on a special crafts project. The residents designed and created ornaments that will adorn Virginia's tree alongside this year's [National Christmas Tree](#) in Washington, D.C.

“A lot of them told me they hadn't done an art project since they were in high school,” Wallace said. “That's been a long time — some of them were 80 or 90 years old. It brought back memories to them, and it got them talking about their younger days. They were so happy.”

The project was done through Tidewater Arts Outreach, a Hampton Roads organization that uses a wide range of arts as tools of healing.

Deborah Perry-Adams, activity director at the nursing home, said she has worked with Tidewater Arts Outreach for at least a decade, often through music programs.

But she said this year's ornament project was special.

“It really allowed them to get their hands together and their minds stimulated,” she said. “And it wasn't until the end that (Wallace) said these ornaments were going to be shown in D.C. They just lit up. It was so wonderful.”

The residents used clear ornaments that were separated into halves, and they filled each one with colorful tissue paper to form individual collages. Wallace said this design was chosen so the decorations would be protected from the elements during harsh weather. The National Christmas Tree, which sits on the Ellipse near the White House, is encircled by trees representing each state.



Residents at the Coliseum Convalescent and Rehabilitation Center in Hampton, working with Tidewater Arts Outreach, crafted ornaments that will hang on the state Christmas tree in Washington, D.C. Pictured: resident Alfred Allred works with tissue paper and an ornament. (Tidewater Arts Outreach / HANDOUT)



MaryAnn Toboz, executive director of Tidewater Arts Outreach, received a request from the Virginia Arts Commission to participate in Thursday's national tree lighting.

"It seemed like a perfect way to put a larger focus on our work," said Toboz, who will travel to Washington on Thursday to help decorate the state tree. "I'm looking forward to sharing with whoever will listen — how this was part of a service project that's important and meaningful."

Toboz said the project is part of the organization's mission of "creative engagement." She said the hands-on act of creating something artistic is even more valuable than the bonus of knowing that the finished products will be prominently displayed in the nation's capital.

"Our elders still have a lot to contribute," she said, "but they are not always being asked or engaged by the community. We're trying to raise that awareness, using this huge opportunity that exists to serve others through the arts."

Wallace, who splits her time between Hampton and a teaching job at the Arlington Arts Center in Northern Virginia, says she will be "super-psyched" to see the ornaments on the tree. Especially after the national tree is officially lit Thursday.

"It's a great joy to be able to share an experience like this with the residents," Wallace said. "Everyone has memories of Christmas. Some of them shared stories about family traditions from when they were little, and what they would do on Christmas. Everyone's was completely different because they had all walked a different life.

"And they shared memories of when they had done art projects as kids, maybe creating something similar to this. It was such a great experience."