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Your Health | Using art to open the hearts and minds of people with dementia



Elizabeth Lokon, founder and director of the Opening Minds through Art program with Scripps Gerontology Center at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, as she teaches an art workshop at the Chrysler Museum of Art Thursday, April 27, 2017. The workshop was hosted by Tidewater Arts Outreach. Lokon taught caregivers how to use art to tap into the creative spirit of people with dementia and engage them in communication.

When using art to draw people from the darkness of dementia, think along the lines of Jackson Pollock rather than Andrew Wyeth.

Abstract, that is, over realism.

That's the advice of Elizabeth Lokon, who gave a workshop a few weeks ago at the Chrysler Museum of Art on how to use art to tap into the creative spirit of elders, and strengthen connections to caregivers.

Her lessons are rooted in a program she developed a decade ago called "Opening Minds through Art" at Scripps Gerontology Center at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.

Lokon deftly summed up the reason why realism doesn't work great for a lot of people: "If you draw a bird and it doesn't look like a bird, you feel like a loser."

Agreed.

The artwork she helps people create at centers across the globe uses swirls of color created by using yarn and paint rollers and sponges to dab abstract images.

The art is created with simple movements, made in colors and shapes chosen by the artists. The art has been reproduced in cards and posters and even decorative pens.

The artists, she said, first think little of what they created, using titles like "A Mess" and "Hodgepodge." But gradually, they begin to see their value. For instance, one man who suffered from insomnia created a green-and-black creation from his memory of his nighttime walks that he titled "Midnight Chaos."

Tidewater Arts Outreach sponsored Lokon's workshop. The organization supports local artists and caregivers in helping people heal, connect and create through writing, art, music, drama and dance.

Lokon included an exercise in the workshop that was not just an icebreaker, but a window into the world of dementia.

We paired off in twos, and took turns talking about what made us feel special for two minutes. One person talked, and the other couldn't engage in conversation, but rather just nod.

At the end of my two minutes, I was tired of talking about myself (granted, I have friends who would have just been getting warmed up). And while my partner talked, and I only smiled, I found myself wanting to jump into the conversation and share more than just an affirmative nod.

The point of the exercise was that when you're dealing with people with dementia, you often have to carry the load of conversation.

"They can't give you the other 50 percent," Lokon said. "You have to carry that and do it without losing them."



Ardell McCoy of Chesapeake is a docent at the Chrysler Museum of Art. She participated in an art workshop at the Chrysler Museum Thursday, April 27, 2017. The workshop was hosted by Tidewater Arts Outreach and taught by Elizabeth Lokon, founder and director of the Opening Minds through Art program at the Scripps Gerontology Center at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Caregivers at the workshop learned how to use art to tap into the creative spirit of people with dementia and engage them in communication.

The exercise also gave me a sense of what it's like to have dementia and not have the ability to join in as much as I'd like.

Another observation Lokon shared has stayed with me in the days since she spoke. She said that people with dementia may not know the names or positions of their caregivers, or remember their personal histories, or even what they did with them the previous day. But they do have favorites, a comment to which everyone in the room nodded in agreement.

She said they make a gut-level, emotional assessment, "And they're good at it."

Maybe better than those of us without memory problems, because all the cognitive clutter is swept away. They know how that person makes them feel. They know whether they're rushed, or stressed, whether they're fully present in the moment.

I think that applies on a wider level, too, that people who are inherently good-hearted and truly engaged with you are instantly recognizable beyond their station in life, beyond what they do and who they are. They make you *feel* good, and that is good as gold.

The caregivers at the workshop ranged from nursing home activity directors to interns at adult day centers to caregivers in the disability field to docents at the art museum. They all took a moment to put themselves in the place of the people they usually help, by creating works of art themselves.

At the end, Lokon asked key questions:

"Did you feel successful? Did you feel positive emotions? Were you engaged? Did you have relationship building with the artists next to you? Was it meaningful? Are you doing something greater than yourself?"

Lokon urged the caregivers to be present and help their elders create the art, but to also leave choices to the artist. There's a sweet spot where connection and art happen.

I leave you with a poem Lokon shared that was written by a man named Wendell Berry with some artful arrangement by Judith-Kate Friedman, another artist who uses her craft to connect:

"When I rise

Let me rise

Like a bird

Joyfully

And when I fall

Let me fall

Like a leaf

Without regrets

Gracefully."



Caregivers for people with dementia and other cognitive disabilities attend a workshop at the Chrysler Museum of Art Thursday, April 27, 2017. The workshop was hosted by Tidewater Arts Outreach and taught by Elizabeth Lokon, founder and director of the Opening Minds through Art program at the Scripps Gerontology Center at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.



Nina Brown with Sentara Rehabilitation and Care Residence in Chesapeake listens during a workshop at the Chrysler Museum of Art Thursday, April 27, 2017 taught by Elizabeth Lokon, founder and director of the Opening Minds through Art program. Lokon is with the Scripps Gerontology Center at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. She taught caregivers how to use art to bolster creativity of people with dementia and engage them in communication. The workshop was hosted by Tidewater Arts Outreach.



April Holloman, the service coordinator for adults with intellectual disabilities at Hope House Foundation, sprinkles glitter over an art piece she created during a workshop at the Chrysler Museum of Art Thursday, April 27, 2017. The workshop was hosted by Tidewater Arts Outreach and taught by Elizabeth Lokon, founder and director of the Opening Minds through Art program. Lokon is with the Scripps Gerontology Center at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. She taught caregivers how to use art to bolster creativity and communication with people with dementia and other cognitive disabilities.