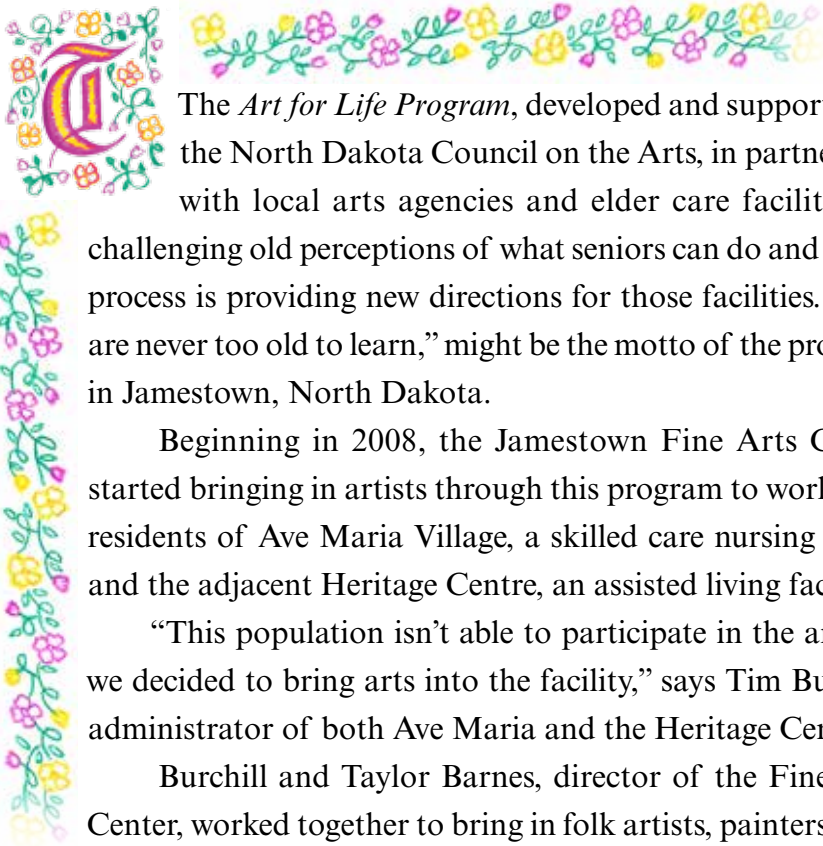


It's Not Just About Bingo Anymore



The *Art for Life Program*, developed and supported by the North Dakota Council on the Arts, in partnership with local arts agencies and elder care facilities, is challenging old perceptions of what seniors can do and in the process is providing new directions for those facilities. “You are never too old to learn,” might be the motto of the program in Jamestown, North Dakota.

Beginning in 2008, the Jamestown Fine Arts Center started bringing in artists through this program to work with residents of Ave Maria Village, a skilled care nursing home, and the adjacent Heritage Centre, an assisted living facility.

“This population isn’t able to participate in the arts, so we decided to bring arts into the facility,” says Tim Burchill, administrator of both Ave Maria and the Heritage Centre.

Burchill and Taylor Barnes, director of the Fine Arts Center, worked together to bring in folk artists, painters, fiber artists, poets, and collage artists, among many others. They also brought in performers and teachers of yoga, although they didn’t call it yoga for fear of turning off potential participants.

“We’ve been delighted with the response from the community,” says Barnes. Poets, storytellers, and wood carvers have all contributed their talents to the effort.

The first year was chaotic and not all activities succeeded. But one of the projects that became everybody’s project is a mural on the 100-foot wall between Ave Maria and the Heritage Centre. With the help of residents, Minnesota painter William Hessian depicted the history of the area, including depictions of threshing machines and little towns that may seem familiar to those who grew up in the surrounding area. Residents also brought pictures of their families and farmsteads, which were then incorporated into the mural, and now residents point with pride to those familiar images.

“Working together on such projects helps staff and residents get to know each other in different ways,” adds Barnes. It also helps residents make connections with one another and even with their families. One man had been in the Navy, but his family knew nothing about his time in the service.

Getting residents out of their shells and out of their



Detail image from the mural created by artist William Hessian with residents at Ave Maria and the Heritage Centre. The images were developed from the memories and photographs of the elders' homes, farms, and community.

rooms are the chief benefits of the arts programs, agree Peggy Widmer and Robin Eberl, activity director at Ave Maria and activity director at the Heritage Centre, respectively. But the arts also give residents a sense of purpose and satisfaction.

One resident named Ron, for example, started to latch hook rugs because someone encouraged him to stop in and try it. Ron took that first project and changed it to create something uniquely his own, according to Eberl. Now it seems as if he can't get enough.

"I like to share my projects and see the expressions on other residents' faces," Ron told Eberl. "It inspires me."

Both Eberl and Widmer are in agreement that the elder residents have done some amazing things in the arts.

"I'm grateful for the arts activities," says Eberl. "We would not have known the hidden talents of our residents."

In many of the activities and arts programs, an informal mentorship process has arisen whereby the residents from the Heritage Centre help residents in Ave Maria. The mentorship process has generated more interaction between residents of the two facilities and gives the assisted care facility residents a sense of worth by helping others, which allows them to focus on what they can do rather than what they can't. In addition,



A portion of the 100 foot mural at Ave Maria and the Heritage Centre in Jamestown, ND.

the process has helped make the two facilities feel more like one facility, says Widmer.

Regular ongoing activities and programs give all residents something to look forward to. For example, an activity therapist started a painting group, which now meets weekly. Other regular activities include a Breakfast Club and a full-blown Happy Hour every other Friday. Residents, families, and guests can come for music, provided in part by Burchill on the accordion, and drinks, including beer, liquor, wine, coffee, and pop. (Note: The *Art for Life Program* does not, however, fund the Happy Hour.) The response to the Happy Hour has been tremendous, and one of the most looked forward to activities is the sing-along. “It’s not just about bingo anymore,” says Widmer.

And the group is always willing to try something new. Barnes isn’t sure how theater might work, but that doesn’t stop her. “You just don’t know until you try.”



A painting depicting an elder's farm in rural Jamestown, ND.



Image depicting the old local school in Jamestown, ND.



Depiction of an elder resident's memory fishing with his son in the James River.



Detail on wall mural.

In addition to all the benefits of the *Art for Life Program* activities for the residents of Ave Maria and the Heritage Centre, Barnes sees benefits for the staff, as well. “I think of equal benefit is training and staff development. The arts provide a springboard to creativity.”

“That first year was a lot of trial and error,” agree both Widmer and Eberl. “But we have learned a lot.”

Burchill knows that the residents are getting a lot from the programs offered, and he is shocked when he hears that a senior facility doesn’t want to bring in artists or expand the activities available. Arts make the facilities an extension of the community and make them more fun places, he says.

Burchill continues by stating that, “Residents may never have had the time for arts or the opportunity. Now that they have the time, they can experience something that enriches their lives. Why wouldn’t you want that for your residents?”

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(All mural artwork created by residents of Ave Maria Village and the Heritage Centre with artist William Hessian. The images were developed from the memories and photographs of the elders’ homes and homesteads. Photos courtesy of Troyd Geist, North Dakota Council on the Arts.)

