

Integrating the arts with health care

Museum program reaches out to Alzheimer patients.

By TANYA PEREZ-BRENNAN, The Times-Union

Flora Galacia sat in the corner of the hallway outside her room as artist Stephanie Sipp made a world of rich color come alive around them.

"She's doing a good job," Galacia said, giving Sipp a grandmotherly pat.

Galacia, 83, is one of several residents on the Alzheimer's Unit at St. Catherine Laboure Manor. The long-term nursing home in Riverside started a mural project a year ago with help from the Cummer Museum of Art & Gardens in the hope that art would create a healing atmosphere.

"There are several studies that show a correlation between engagement in the arts and [healing]," said Jill Sonke-Henderson, co-director of the Center for the Arts in Health care and an artist in residence with Shands Arts in Medicine at the University of Florida in Gainesville.

The program, Art Connections in Healthcare, was founded four years ago at the Cummer, said Hope McMath, education director. And after a brief meeting with St. Catherine and the Alzheimer's Association two years ago, museum officials decided to bring the Cummer Gardens to the unit's peach-colored walls.

So Sipp, along with Ali Fuderer and Jordan Foster, both art educators at the Cummer, committed to painting the unit's walls every Friday.

"It's about the importance of art in our lives," Sipp said. "Art isn't just about being in a museum. People walk into this unit and become emotionally engaged."

Though it is hard to quantify the impact of art on healing, staff members at St. Catherine said they have already seen some positive results with the Alzheimer residents.



Artist Stephanie Sipp works on a mural at the Alzheimer's Unit at St. Catherine Laboure Manor depicting a scene from the Cummer Museum gardens.
BOB MACK/The Times-Union



Jordan Foster, an art educator at the Cummer Museum, works on mural details at St. Catherine Labourer Manor. BOB MACK/The Times-Union

Terry Hungate, director of nursing, said the residents seem less isolated than before.

"I think it brings them out of their rooms because they [see] colors," she said. "They just look at the pictures and are able to remember flowers, birds and trees."

The unit's walls are covered in images of green, leafy trees, snaking vines and a fountain from the Cummer gardens.

Outside each resident's room is an individualized, homey touch, such as an architectural border or a perching bird.

Museum officials are confident there is a connection between art and healing. Two years ago, the Cummer conducted a study looking at the impact of its partnership with the Body and Soul Program on other residents at St. Catherine, said McMath. The study concludes that exposure to music and visual art contributed to an improvement in the mood of residents.

"Art is the bridge to human interaction that's meaningful," McMath said. "It's just the way to get to something else. ... This just shows that art has many roles."

The art benefits more than just the patients. One family member wrote a glowing letter of support for the project to try to secure additional funding to finish the last two hallways.

And even the artists have changed through their participation.

"Just the fact that we do it here and leave a sense of ourselves is really significant," Sipp said.

The project creates a camaraderie among the artists as well as giving them a feeling of doing something for the community.

"This is fully healing painting to me," Fuderer said. "It's a release; it's meditative."



Mural scenes brighten the hallways of the Alzheimer's Unit at St. Catherine Labourer Manor in Riverside. BOB MACK/The Times-Union

During a recent visit, Sipp held a palette of house paints -- reds, greens, blues and whites -- in a pink Styrofoam egg carton.

"As we go along, all of us have gotten better," she said.

Sipp thinks colors can help heal. She is giving a workshop at the Cummer today March 26, "Garden as Inspiration: Healing Colors," that focuses on collage, and in May, Sunday May 27 she will speak at a lunch lecture at the Women's Center of Jacksonville about the mural project.

Sipp said she has noticed an interest in the art by some of the residents. During one visit, an elderly man stroked the wall. Putting color on the walls reminds people of another world, she said.

"There's definitely a connection between ourselves and the outside world," she said.

St. Catherine is not the only medical facility to include art in its environment. But the Cummer is one of the few museums nationwide to work so aggressively at integrating the arts withinto a health-care setting, said Sonke-Henderson.

"They are definitely leading the way in many areas," Sonke-Henderson said. "They're in a very unique position as a museum . . . bringing art into communities from the perspective of real service and real healing."