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Art for Good

ARTICLE | DECEMBER 26, 2011 - 4:21PM | BY BONNIE SCHULTZ



Photo by Bonnie Schultz

Eva Mantell loves teaching art. “When students aren’t expecting to come up with anything good, and they are engaged and surprised by what they’ve created, it feels great. I find it very energizing.”

Mantell lives in Princeton and teaches community art classes that are free to the public through the Arts Council of Princeton: a class at Princeton Shopping Center (a temporary space because of flooding from Hurricane Irene) for seniors and caregivers on Wednesday mornings, a class for Homefront children ages 5-20 on Thursday afternoons, and a class at the Acute Care for the Elderly (ACE) unit at the University Medical Center at Princeton on Friday mornings.

At the caregiver class, students were working on a Matisse-inspired painting that was a contribution for the “Sauce for the Goose” holiday show at the Arts Council. What was unique about the painting, which was based on “Snow Flowers” by Matisse, is that it was to be rendered in cake icing.

“People might have dementia or Alzheimer’s,” says Mantell, “and this is a good way for them to make art with materials that aren’t harmful. The activity makes the person feel engaged, creatively stimulated and cared for, and it may stir memories.” For the caregiver, the art class acts as a stress relief and creative outlet.

Mantell has been an art teacher since graduate school. In 1985 she graduated *magna cum laude* from the University of Pennsylvania with a B.A. in English and went on to earn an M.F.A. at the School of Visual Arts in New York City. She started teaching at the Arts Council of Princeton in 2003 and

eventually found herself in community outreach situations.

“We want to bring art into the real world,” says Mantell. “I have found that people with the least art in their lives need it the most. On Thursday nights, I teach kids who are struggling with a lot of issues. The Homefront kids come to the table as artists regardless of what is going on with them at the time. It is nice for them to have art take the stage.”

“With the seniors, I often hear ‘I can’t draw, I’m not an artist,’ or ‘What is this, kindergarten?’ To that, I respond, ‘Kindergarten or graduate school, take your pick.’ Once they start working, they realize how much they’re capable of,” says Mantell. “It’s great because you should have art at every stage of your life.”

This is the second year of the caregiver class. Last year Mantell taught the class at [Stonebridge](#), a continuing care retirement community, and [Buckingham Place](#), an assisted living and adult daycare center.

Members of the senior and caregiver class include Harold Hochstadt, a 92-year-old retired chemist whose wife signed him up for the art class. “I liked working with oils because you can mix the oil paint, which appealed to me as a chemist. Working with pastels was horrible but it turned out to be the greatest thing I ever did. I ended up framing two of my pastels; it’s amazing how far you can come by experimenting and playing.”

“You don’t have to be ‘good’ for other people,” says Hochstadt. “Do it because you’re having the greatest time in the world!”

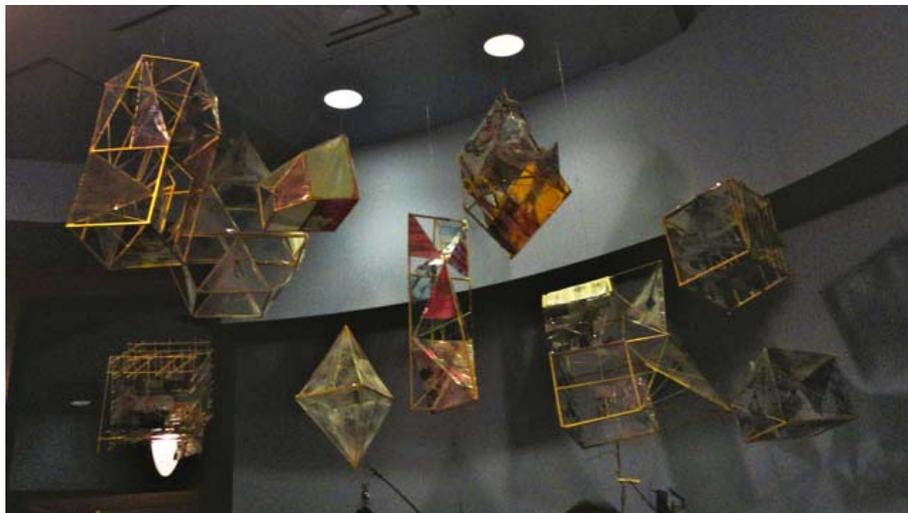
Mantell set up the icings for the students to start painting. “Art should be an experience,” says Mantell, “and a little bit ridiculous now and then, not so serious. It’s important to bring in the ‘fun’ factor.”

The caregiver class is funded by grants -- initially from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, and most recently from the Church & Dwight Employee Giving Fund. Additional partial funding is provided by grants from Janssen Pharmaceuticals, Inc. and the National Center for Creative Aging.

In contrast to the fairly new senior and caregiver classes, the class for Homefront children has been running since 1983. Mantell describes the class as a “big, unruly” group and lots of fun. Children arrive at the Arts Council on Thursday afternoon, where they receive a hot meal and art class. Topics range from formal art classes with painting and sculpture to more conceptual pieces such as poetry and drama. Children may take workshops on improvisation, staging, and writing monologues with [McCarter](#)

Education. During the holiday season, they are able to attend “A Christmas Carol” at McCarter Theater.

For the “Return:Home” show, the children created a group project of a futuristic floating city, which is a permanent installation on the second floor of the Arts Council.



When Mantell teaches at the ACE unit at University Medical Center, her students are older patients who are often very ill. Because the students change from week to week, she does not have them work on long-term projects.

Mantell eases students into the class by showing them a famous artwork and eliciting their responses to it. She often presents Robert Indiana's LOVE piece, asks students to look at it, requesting that they think of a word important enough for them to make into a piece of art. Some examples have been “home,” “peace” or a grandchild’s name.

“The class is not really art therapy, which is a specific approach to deal with a specific problem that a person might be having. It is a chance for professionally-trained fine artists to make a contribution doing what we do best.” At the class held the week before, a patient said to Mantell, “Coming to the hospital has really changed!”

Mantell says, “I love testing art in this context and seeing if it holds up.”

Rebecca Godofsky, an RN who is Niche Coordinator on the ACE unit, brought in a patient who is 90 years old, for the art class. Mantell had her look through an art book of Zhang Hongtu's work and choose a picture that she liked. The patient chose a painting of a lighted house with darkness all around, saying that the lighted house felt “warm and comforting.” Using oil

sticks, she and the other people in the class drew in swirly motions on paper, emulating the art of Zhang Hongtu and Van Gogh. Each picture was passed onto the next person who continued to work on it.

“Art is very emotional,” says Mantell. “If someone is ill or injured, it often speaks to the part of the brain that is still functional.”

“It’s good when someone gets to be a student and not a patient. When I teach at the hospital, the class is a chance for a person to be someone exploring art. I try to help them express themselves, join a community and hopefully experience something beautiful.”

About the Author »



Bonnie Schultz

Bonnie Schultz has worked as a technology and marketing writer in the Boston area. She moved here in 1997 and is the mother of two boys. Since 2007, Bonnie has been blogging about food and community happenings in the Princeton area.

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