

Art for Life brings workshops to residents of Ave Maria Village

Toni Pirkel, [The Jamestown Sun](#) - 01/23/2009

The Arts Center and Ave Maria Village have begun what they hope will be a long-term partnership to increase the well-being of the elderly through art.

Art for Life, a program funded by a \$10,000 grant, brings to Ave Maria five artists, chosen by the Arts Center, to provide weeklong workshops for residents once a month. During the six-month on-site program, the artists will focus on hands-on art activities for residents to help reduce what are referred to as "the three plagues of the elderly" — boredom, loneliness and helplessness.

"There are three sites in North Dakota working with the (North Dakota) Council on the Arts on Art for Life," said Taylor Barnes, Arts Center director. "The grant is through the National Endowment for the Arts. Along with the artists in residence there is an equal emphasis on developing staff skills, so they can carry on the program."

According to Barnes, the national grant program is based on a study by New York physician Dr. William Thomas, who conducted medical research with elders in long-term care facilities. He identified the three plagues that negatively affect the physical and emotional health of the elderly.

"The arts provide new avenues of expression for the elderly," Barnes said. "The goal is to transform part of their daily living through art. It's not about creating art; the value of art is in the process."

A NDCA pilot project from 2001 to 2003 showed that intensive art activities provided a marked improvement in combating the three plagues. The Arts Center and Ave Maria are looking for the same outcome in the long-term care facility.

"The stated goal is to help residents become more social and healthier in a variety of ways," said Stuart Bernard, the Arts Center's Art for Life project administrator.

"This is a chance to address quality of life issues for our residents — to bring something new into the mix. They need stimulation and things to challenge their minds," said Tim Burchill, Ave Maria administrator. "We also want to train our staff to take all this beyond the grant and to work with the Arts Center on doing that."

Wednesday, Lila Hauge-Stoffel conducted an Ave Maria staff workshop on simple art projects that can be used to engage residents and involve their families in a broader context. Using watercolors, the staff explored a few therapeutic art activities that are also easy for residents to do.

"If we can do this anyone can," Burchill said, laughing at his artistic attempts.

One activity created a watercolor painting of the "family" tree. Hauge-Stoffel told the staff members, which included the facility's five activity employees, that writing in family names could spark conversation about relatives, ancestors and family history.

"The conversation is as important as the activity," Hauge-Stoffel said.

After experiencing the four-hour workshop, Burchill said he and his staff are excited about the artists who will be doing a residency at the facility.

"We're more fired up than ever about it," he said. "There's a lot of flexibility in the program."

Hauge-Stoffel will start off the six-month series of visits by artists with a week of weaving in February. Participants will weave a bookmark. A retired professor of art, Hauge-Stoffel also studied art therapy and applied her knowledge in art activities for people of all ages.

Other artists include Mary Louise Defender Wilson, a Dakotah/Hidatsa storyteller. Defender Wilson will tell her stories and encourage the elders in her session to orally share stories they heard as children with one another and their families. During her residency, Judith Simundson will work with participants to write their stories. Bonnie Tressler, of the Arts Center staff, will teach a bookmaking residency to bind their stories and Pieper Bloomquist will teach participants to use Swedish Dala painting to depict an aspect of them. Residents can participate in any or all the sessions.

Family, volunteers and staff are included in all the sessions. And during each residency, one evening will be set aside for a public presentation that includes the families of participants.

Burchill believes a number of residents from the village and the Heritage Centre will participate. The program is geared toward individual physical abilities, he said, and gives groups and people with all levels of ability an opportunity to be part of the activities. He's hoping Art for Life will provide measurable outcomes in improving the lives of the elderly.

"We're not interested in declining and dying here, we're interested in living," he said. "We need the place to be an environment of life."

Sun reporter Toni Pirkl can be reached at (701) 952-8453 or by e-mail at tonip@jamestownsun.com