

Art therapy can help you unlock memories, create legacies, or share experiences

By Kathleen Harte Simone

Art therapy is a creative process involving art-making that is both healing and life-enhancing. Participants engage in creative projects that not only stimulate memories, but also promote socialization, enhance communication, and provide meaning in their aging years.

"Art-making is inherently positive," says Abbién Crowley Ciucci, a board-certified art therapist who practices in the Philadelphia area. "We exercise our brains and extend our decision-making skills, even in choosing colors. It supports brain function and is a really wonderful outlet for expression. The ability to use image as a jumping off point for conversation is so valuable. It fosters conversation and enhances connections."

"When I'm in a room painting with other seniors who were once strangers, and we are engaging in conversation and sharing stories, we are taken back to good times," says Lois Acker of Center City, who has actively participated in classes with a certified art therapist for nearly two years. "It has enhanced my life. It puts me at ease, and I feel connected again and valued."

Acker and her new friends have created

mosaics, paintings, charcoal drawings, projects with yarn, collages, and three-dimensional sculpture to name a few, all of which she says "has helped me in my journey."

Life-affirming

"For older adults, art therapy focuses on socialization, on breaking down walls of isolation," says Scott Reid, MCAT, cognitive fitness coordinator at the University of Pennsylvania Memory Center. "When people go through this process it is life-affirming; there is a space for them to say 'I'm still here.' It gives people an opportunity to review their experiences, communicate their values with others, and have that sense of identity that can be so affirming."

Ciucci noted the value of art therapy in terms of legacy building. "As art therapists, we focus on the process, not the product – but art therapy is also a way for seniors to tell their stories in art and to pass it on to the next generation. Art lives beyond you. The art you are making is a stamp of where you are – and who you are – in that moment."

Genevieve Coutroubis, director of the regional community art program at the Center for Emerging Visual Arts in Philadelphia, spearheads

NewCourtland's Artists Fellowship which pairs seniors with students in a community-based setting. One of the most recent projects, directed by artist Jill Galloway Sherman, brought together residents of the Germantown Home with Project Learn school students who used various collage methods to create artwork centered on the concept of imagination or memory.

"This program allows our seniors and students to have a voice through art," says Alison Corter, manager of communications and development at NewCourtland. "Through intergenerational programs, people of all ages share their talents and stories, supporting each other in relationships that benefit both the individuals and the community. The interaction between the students and seniors is priceless." The artwork will be exhibited at the Stella Elkins Galleries at Temple University's Tyler School of Art from May 27 to June 20, and

then permanently installed at the Germantown House.

Art therapy has been most prevalent in medical facilities and nursing homes, but it is slowly becoming more widely available. In Philadelphia, classes can be found at some senior centers, often free of charge or with a nominal fee to cover materials. Some adult day care centers, including Aramingo Adult Day Care, offer art therapy with their services. The Fairmount Art Center and Queen Village Art Center offer classes with certified art therapists by appointment. In addition, private, semi-private, and small group classes can be arranged directly with certified art therapists; contact the Delaware Valley Art Therapy Association (DVATA) for information about its members: 484-727-8891 or www.dvata.org.

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