



Young at ART

BY JAN SOMERFELD

Learning something new can be a challenge at any age. For some, that is an exciting opportunity. For others, moving beyond routine makes them uncomfortable and tests their self-confidence. But opportunity can outweigh risk, and as the old saying goes, “nothing ventured, nothing gained.”

A year ago, Ruth Hellenbrand, programs manager at the North/Eastside Senior Coalition (NESCO), offered an Artful Aging class and 12

students responded. The weekly class provided opportunities to explore different mediums of art and identify the one best suited for each student while taking into account their stage in life and interests.

“I entered the class with no experience and a lot of doubt as to my art talent,” explains Sharon, a recent retiree. “The Artful Aging class helped build my self-confidence and gave me a strong desire to explore the art world more.” Sharon encour-

ages others to experience what they can do just by giving themselves the chance. “If I never took this class, I would not have realized this.”

Ruth proposed the class to use creative aging to motivate older adults to learn, make, and share art in a socially engaging setting. She promoted the class to seniors 60+ from different backgrounds and cultures. Ruth explains, “The focus was on encouraging people who enjoy art but are isolated or have



minimal interaction with other cultures.”

The Dane County Agency on Aging provided funding through a Leck Grant. The idea came from a program developed by Amy Conover Cavi when she was artist in residence at a local memory care facility. Amy instructed the NESCO class, gently encouraging the students and providing them with the tools to complete their projects. Amy dubbed the group “young at art.”

The first assignment was to select a personal item and share its significance with the class. Amy taught students different mediums to reproduce each item, and paired them during class to foster discussions and support for one another, particularly relating to their cultural differences and similarities.



An art show and reception was held at the Warner Park Community Recreation Center in November. Students selected pieces for display and planned and hosted the event. A second art show was held in December at the Madison Lakeview Library. “Many people stopped specifically to see the art show and asked for it by name,” says librarian Lesley Kircher.

The students didn’t want the class to end. “They were all working toward the same goal,” Ruth explains. “They cheered each other on and boosted each other’s self-esteem. They took an interest in each other because their work was so personal and there was always a story to be shared.”

The class felt a strong sense of belonging, purpose, and pride, and as one student, Dana, recently told Ruth, “I forgot to tell you, this class changed my life.” But Irma may have expressed it best. “I see it now—art is from the heart. It’s not about who we are or what we do. We connect through the heart.”

The young at art students wanted to continue and Ruth had a growing list of new prospects. Through the generosity of two private donations, NESCO held a second Artful Aging class in February. Twelve eager students responded and three returning students served as mentors.

Amy notes the new class had a “different cultural flavor,” and it was important to help the students get to know one another. She asked them to identify their hometowns, and they covered the globe. “We had students from Mexico, Bolivia, Colombia, Peru, and Africa.” Amy continues, “Language was more of a challenge in this class, but it was fun to have the different stories.” Rodrigo Valdivia, NESCO Latinx

program specialist, assisted with translation.

Although the students were new to art, they were very receptive to exploring the various mediums and techniques. Roberto explains, “Some drawings are much harder than others, but combining the colors is my favorite part of creating art.” Amy worked with the students to discover the best medium for each individual.

At the last class in May, students pondered their selections for display. The Madison Lakeview Library hosted the opening art show and reception in early June followed by a second show at the Warner Park Community Recreation Center. Ruth is planning a third Artful Aging class in response to Olga’s request, “Senorita, more classes please.”

Photographs provided by NESCO.

Jan Somerfeld serves on the NESCO Board of Directors and the Warner Park Community Recreation Center Advisory Subcommittee. NESCO provides programs, advocacy, and resources to enhance the quality of life for older adults and helps them remain active, independent, and connected in the community.

