

LARKSPUR CLASSES

CREATIVE OUTLET

Marin program adds art to housing support



Artist Idie Weinsoff, standing at the head of the table, works with residents seated from left to right, Tracie Palmer, Ron Brock, Ricky Randon and Jimmie Starnes on their print making projects at the permanent supportive housing where they live in Larkspur. PHOTOS BY SHERRY LAVARS — MARIN INDEPENDENT JOURNAL



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In the community room of a supportive housing complex in Larkspur, a woman carefully carves away at a sketch of tiger lilies on a clay slab, which she'll then turn into a print. "If you had told me I'd be printmaking before this, I'd say there's no way," Tracie Palmer said.

Palmer is a participant in a new pilot art program called StART Marin, which was created to improve mental health and boost community. The four-part series made its debut July 10 at a permanent housing facility at 1251 S. Eliseo Drive.

The 43-room complex was built for people who are chronically homeless. It was funded by the state's Homekey Program.

Steve Bajor, who grew up in Mill Valley, developed the pilot art program to address another important aspect of housing people: quality of life. While there is a fair amount of funding and resources in Marin County for housing, Bajor said community programming within housing sites can be harder to come by.

“My premise on this whole thing was we not only need to house people, but we also need to address quality of life,” Bajor said. “There are a lot of ways to do that, but I figured the place to start was in developing these visual art workshops.”

Bajor received a \$2,500 grant from the Mill Valley Rotary Club to start the program. Rileystreet Art in San Rafael offered to discount the supplies. The instructors leading the classes are retired art teachers in Marin County.

Idie Weinsoff of Fairfax is teaching the first four classes in the series. Once a week this month, Weinsoff has been teaching participants about drawing, printmaking, watercolor painting and Chinese brush painting.

She said the participants’ ability is mixed, and some don’t want to follow any plan, but everyone seems engaged. “I think it was a nice diversion for them, and most of them seem to really enjoy it, so that has been gratifying,” Weinsoff said. “Some didn’t want to follow the plan and I said that’s fine. I’m there to add to their lives and add to their experience.”

Weinsoff said she would like to get the participants to start carrying a sketchbook around. Art therapy can improve cognitive function, reduce stress and boost self esteem and confidence, according to the American Psychiatric Association. The community aspect of it also combats social isolation.

“You lose yourself and when you really get into it you forget about reality, and that’s a big thing to accomplish, especially these days,” Weinsoff said. “I think we could all use some art in our lives. It’s a diversion. You slow down. It kind of feeds your soul.”

Though the idea to do one medium per class has changed — many projects take a bit longer than the two hours the class allows, and some participants want to continue working on their projects during the next class — the goal seems to have been achieved.

Some of the artists ask to focus on one medium, as they found they enjoy one more than another.

“It’s evolving organically,” Bajor said. “The idea is to engage the folks and have them enjoy it and be stimulated.”

Ron Brock, another resident participating in the program, said he has really liked the classes. He said his mother was an artist, and he grew up in museums. He created one print — a motif of baseball items — and then decided to move on watercolors.

“The teacher has a fun attitude,” Brock said.

Palmer said having instruction on various art mediums has been helpful.

“I really enjoy it,” Palmer said. “It’s a good addition to anything and I wouldn’t be able to afford it because of the supplies. It’s fun.”

Kristin Ullom, the associate director of housing services with Episcopal Community Services, said the organization hopes to hang the art around the building and would like to continue a similar program in the facility. The organization operates the housing facility.

“It’s been lovely,” Ullom said. “It’s been a very large turnout for our group, and anyone can participate.”

Bajor hopes that after some more fundraising, the program will expand to other art forms. He also hopes to offer the workshop at other housing facilities in the county.

“You can house people and then the next step is helping feed them, but then it’s also addressing people’s creativity and soul, and quality-of-life thing,” Bajor said.