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Rise's Art Speaks program takes home award

Olivia Alveshere Staff Writer Jul 14, 2018 0

Adults with disabilities in Rise's Arts Speaks program are never referred to as clients or participants, according to art therapist Stacy Gross. They're artists – plain and simple.

The program serves many adults with emotional, intellectual and physical disabilities, and Gross ensures all projects are inclusive so that everyone has an opportunity to create a masterpiece.

Rise, headquartered in Spring Lake Park, was recently recognized by the Minnesota Organization for Habilitation and Rehabilitation and presented with the Life Enrichment Award.

"Having a good life involves connecting with the people around us and being involved in our community and activities outside of work," Mike Burke, president of MOHR, said in a press release. "Nonprofit service providers are innovators when it comes to enriching the lives of the individuals with disabilities, and they deserve more credit for their work."

Rise has had art programming in place for more than a decade, but three years ago Gross became the first art therapist to lead the Art Speaks program, and today she visits 10 of Rise's 23 sites to offer classes weekly.

Last year, she worked with more than 250 adults with disabilities.

At first, some resisted art projects, asking for help immediately or ignoring the materials in front of them altogether.

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Gross recalls one man who was particularly against the idea of painting, and now "I'll put a paintbrush in front of him, and he'll just go to town."

When Gross took a week of vacation earlier this month and returned the following week, adults in the Coon Rapids day program applauded when she walked into the room.

While receiving the Life Enrichment Award is "gratifying," such enthusiasm is what helps Gross know Art Speaks is making a positive difference.

The program's goal is to boost self-esteem and present art as a positive coping mechanism for adults with disabilities.

Additionally, with 30 to 40 percent of adults in Art Speaks unable to communicate verbally, the artwork truly does become a way for them to speak.

"It's an alternative way of communication," Gross said.

The artists' work is on display throughout Anoka and Hennepin counties, and it's for sale.

A recent silent auction at CommonBond saw 24 of 49 pieces of artwork sell. Eighty percent of the money collected is returned to the artists with the other 20 percent allowing for supplies to be purchased to keep the program going.

"We do a lot of painting," Gross said, and with her background in printmaking, that's also a favorite.

"My whole goal is to be as inclusive as possible," she said, and sometimes that means finding an alternative paintbrush if an individual's disability makes it difficult for him or her to hold something so small.

Gross said she spends a lot of time in the kitchen aisle at Walmart searching for unconventional art supplies, like a potato masher, which has a thicker handle and can spread paint in a unique way.

When Gross had adults in the Coon Rapids day program create sand art July 10, they were focused on the task at hand. Each of the 15 artists had their own vision and asked for specific colors of sand, using the glue to form designs or trace their hands.

"It offers great social skills, sensory skills (and) independence," said Valerie Gauster, program supervisor for Rise's adult day programs in Coon Rapids and Mounds View. "(Gross) definitely adds a lot to their

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day.”

“I love sand art,” one artist said aloud to herself Tuesday.

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Tags Rise Art Speaks Disability Art

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Since 2013, I have primarily covered the Anoka-Hennepin and Spring Lake Park school districts as well as the city of Spring Lake Park for ABC Newspapers.

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