

Yellow frames make art special

Project helps retirement home residents thrive

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Brian Crowl has always been a guy who could look at the big picture.

So when he started “The Yellow Frame Project,” it became all about helping others lead more enriching lives.



Three years ago, Crowl was visiting a church friend who had no children and her husband had recently passed, causing her to struggle to keep her mental sharpness. Then the activities director gave her a coloring book.

“I thought that was stupid,” Crowl said, “but it turned her life around. She knew who she was and where she was, and that drawing changed the perspective. She’d go from saying, ‘I wish I was home’ and ‘I don’t like the food’ to ‘Look what I made today! I made this for Bob down the hallway and the nursing staff.’ ”



Brenda Walker, a resident of Lutheran Life Villages, is framed by four of her artwork at a recent display of The Yellow Frame Project, which presents artwork created by those in retirement communities in public displays as a way to encourage creativity

Before she passed, Crowl’s friend had four or five good months and had a reason to get up in the morning. Amazed by the impact of something so simple, Crowl became determined to add to it, and over lunch with buddy Brandon Roberts, “The Yellow Frame Project” started. Crowl’s friends donate frames that are painted sunshine yellow and are filled with drawings of residents in retirement and

nursing facilities to be exhibited.

Sometimes there are public showcases of the art, which is then returned to the facilities for further display. The quality of the art doesn’t matter as much as the effort put into it, though some neglected talents are rekindled. There’s no money involved, just placing drawings in frames and simply hanging them on a wall. But the results can be empowering. “He saw people who really weren’t thriving, and maybe there was something more that could be done to bring back the kind of vibrancy they had in their life,” said Angela Boerger, a strategic communications consultant who is part of Crowl’s group. “He had this convergence, this inspiration of, ‘Why can’t we help stimulate things for individuals who find themselves in these circumstances but also showcase the artistic product that they produce?’ It seems like such a simple kind of outlet, but it really keeps them alive, enthused and connected to the world.”

As he often does, Crowl, 62, grabbed a group of his friends who advise and add

to his idea. He was not trying to take over or intrude on the work of well-trained and competent therapists but thought there might be enhancements possible. Why not make a simple event in people's lives more of a showcase they could be proud of?

"It really helps to give people confidence and an ownership of the creativity that is within them that maybe they don't have a chance to get that out," said Edsall House Service Coordinator Laura Bowman, a 30-year veteran community mental health worker. "It's good for people and allows them to get together and socialize. I saw people doing pictures and holding them up so proud, 'I made this.' It just makes people feel included and special."

Alisa Gearhart got sick a few years ago, which altered her life because she was considered disabled and she became depressed. Crowl's suggestion of coloring allowed her to handle the pain. Now she produces two or three designs per day, some she uses for cards or gifts. "He got me into the coloring and we discussed doing it because it would make me feel better," she said. "Mentally and physically, the coloring just opened everything up. I was never the artist in the family, but all of a sudden I just loved it."

Now she loves shadowing, focusing on bumblebees, cherubs, children, flowers and crosses.

"The Yellow Frame Project" was delayed for two years because of the pandemic, but Crowl couldn't let it go. Crowl, owner of his family business, The Playfair Group, which distributes coin-operated amusement devices, kept talking with retirement care professionals to develop relationships and share ideas. Kevin Naber, Lutheran Life Villages director of marketing and community outreach, planned a Yellow Frame Project show for more than a year.

"It's all about that expression for the residents," Naber said. "The cool thing is everybody can get something different out of it. We have certainly seen hidden talents. There's an emotional expression side to it. People may not be able to always verbalize some of the stuff they are going through, but any creative outlet, I think, is helpful in processing that stuff."

With enough donations of frames to paint (information available at theyellowframeproject.org), Crowl said he'll run the project forever. He and Roberts love being there when the drawings are created, asking questions, finding out the meanings and listening to memories.

"I just love all the stories,"

Crowl said. "And in some cases this may even change their lives."