

Eye to Eye



JUNE 2009

Dear Reader:

The “GIVERS” in our name has as much weight with us as “ELDERS” does. Though the seniors we serve often feel isolated by chronic illness, they still have a strong incentive to give to others. Such an impulse is crucial to our mission – *Connecting the Generations*.

The neat thing about Art With Elders’ public exhibitions – highlighted in this issue – is that they provide a generous two-way street for this impulse. Elders share the gift of art. The public responds with the gifts of recognition, inclusion and praise. The joy of reciprocity!

Brent Nettle, Executive Director

Excerpts from Mitch Meyer’s article in the book
Embracing Art and Aging



I was surprised when my mother, Beatrice Meyer, first told me that she was going to start to paint. As far as I knew, she had never done art work. Only a few months earlier, she had suffered debilitating strokes and had been admitted to the skilled nursing section of Reutlinger Community for Jewish Living (RCJL) in Danville. Given the shock of her sudden disability,

the news that she had entered the “Discovering the Artist Within” program there and had begun to paint came as a real lift to my spirits.

When I was very young, my mother was stricken with mental illness. For many years, her illness had been controlled effectively with a low dose of medication. I wasn’t prepared for the intense discomfort that her first completed work caused me.

It was a watercolor of a tree at the height of its brilliant fall display. The painting showed hundreds of mainly red and yellow dots falling in cascades around a tree trunk

and branches. Every bit of the canvas was covered with these vibrant colors. It seemed to me to have an almost manic intensity.

The quality of my mother’s paintings steadily changed, becoming more serene while maintaining their vivid colors. The wired, scary intensity of the first painting had given way to an exuberant, balanced portrayal of color and nature. It was as if my mother’s mind was getting healthier, with the evidence preserved on each painting. The wild confusion of her mind was now settling into joyful liveliness.

Dutch Landscape, Beatrice Meyer, Pastel on paper, 2005



Her works were selected for ELDERGIVERS’ Annual Art With Elders Exhibit four years in a row. Each year at the Gala Reception in San Francisco, it struck me as remarkable that she took it all in stride as if she’d been to dozens of such events, even though she had spent decades in half-way houses for psychiatric outpatients and other facilities in Brooklyn far from the world of banquets.

My mother passed away peacefully at Reutlinger in 2005. In the art room, working with Betty Rothaus, her teacher, she had the chance to fully express her mind, conscious and subconscious, in all its uniqueness and wonder. It was in ELDERGIVERS’ public exhibits, though, that the world was able to see her art and respond, telling her that it loved and valued what it saw.

Mitch Meyer has been a member of ELDERGIVERS’ governing board since 2007.

Engaging Art and Aging is available through Amazon.com.

Betty Rothaus, Art Director



Through creative endeavors, we bear witness, for ourselves and for others, to our shared humanity. Betty Rothaus

Working with elders over time, teachers find that the artists' personal and artistic growth is captured in their artwork. We observe changes in their ability to perceive more clearly, to conceptualize, and to confidently make aesthetic decisions. We watch them improve their art skills: design, drawing, painting, handling of tools and materials, hand-eye coordination and sensitivity to the subject. Our art studios become spaces that foster self-perception, self-worth and self-esteem.

Simultaneously, there is a bigger context. In working with elders, we are also changing perceptions about what is possible as we age. Many cultural beliefs and myths "define" aging in a negative or limiting way. We find ways to expand possibilities and open the doors to a new life.

This work also reaches younger generations. We help them to see their own natural and inevitable process of aging and mortality differently. Although you can't always control what happens to you, you can choose how you respond. You can choose to continue to grow.

When I first found out about Art With Elders (AWE), I had been teaching this art program for ten years. We engaged the community by taking our residents and their art to Jewish Community Centers and by developing a slide show program to share with educational, medical and theological institutions.



Stanley, Betty Rothaus
Pastel on Canson

What was exciting about AWE was that it connected elder artists in other nursing homes to each other and expanded their artistic horizons. The gala opening brought everyone together, creating an artistic community and fostering an awareness in the elders of their own abilities as individuals, artists, and mentors. They became aware of themselves as a collective group that could communicate with a larger audience. Families and staff saw the elders in a new and positive way, and the touring exhibit widened the audience to include people who encountered elder art in their work places, recreational centers, and public buildings. It let elders know that they had something of value to share.

You can see Betty's artwork at www.bettyrothaus.com.

Meet some of the artists at Reutlinger:



Rose Krichiver working on a painting; Rose & daughter, Judy Rotman.

Rose Krichiver: *I cannot conceive of living my life without art. Art has been a part of my life since I was young. When other kids went off to play, I was drawing on every sidewalk around my house. The rain would wash it away, and I would start all over again. Everything was a canvas for me. Everything I saw had unlimited possibilities in the way it could translate into pieces of art. I was drawn to anyone who expressed themselves in that way. I am lucky. When I see a painting, I see what's behind it; I see what the artist has seen.*



Zoe Landau doing studies in preparation for a new work.

Zoe Landau: *Art is an expression of the beauty that exists in the whole world, an appreciation of the human soul. To understand art, you look into the face of a poppy. Art opened up the whole world to me and let me fly. And it opened my soul to others, my continued quest.*



Evelyn Brand working on the second painting she has ever done.

Evelyn Brand: *I always enjoyed art exhibits and taking art appreciation classes, but I never felt I had any talent. After working on an RCJL community art project and attending an AWE exhibition, I finally got my courage up and surprised myself. It led me to look more closely at the world around me – seeing textures, shapes, distances and light – and brought out my feelings.*



Always by Ruth Janger in 2009; Ruth and daughter, Shari Janger.

Ruth Janger: *I love to have a paintbrush in my hand and feel I live in another world when I'm painting. Sometimes I think – did I really do that? The paintings I made are my heart and soul and things I love. Art can bring out feelings you didn't know you had. And best of all you can be yourself. It's a good feeling to know I am an artist.*



Viola Dubov working on a new painting.

Viola Dubov: *I have a new interest in life: I'm learning to paint! Painting is changing how I look at the world. I am learning to recognize beauty; it's not enough to "look", we need to "notice" so we can appreciate. I'm proud of myself that I am able to learn and to have a new interest that gives me pleasure and joy. I feel useful and it adds to my self-esteem.*

To see the work of other Artists in the Art With Elders program visit our on-line galleries at www.eldergivers.org.

Discovering the Artist Within

Reutlinger's activity program is geared towards wellness with the intention to celebrate wisdom and create present memories. Our art program, under the leadership of Betty Rothaus, is a safe, creative, inspiring space where self-expression is constantly encouraged. Our elders come through our doors with a wealth of rich diverse life-long experiences. It is our responsibility to rekindle, ignite and empower our residents.

When Reutlinger teamed up with AWE, and resident's creations were exhibited, I witnessed first hand the powerful effect this contribution had on our residents. It became obvious our elder students began to feel a greater sense of pride, respect and attained many rewards far beyond their artistic creation.

AWE has been instrumental for our elder artists to contribute to society by sharing their dreams, thoughts, and experiences for generations to come. The communication process begins in the art room, continues with relatives, peers, care givers, visitors and beyond. ELDER-GIVERS and Reutlinger share the concept of breaking down the stereotypes, keeping seniors vital and integral in our community. We are grateful to collaborate with AWE. This relationship is truly a win, win for everyone!

Carol Goldman, Director of Programs
Reutlinger Community for Jewish Living

Alameda Hospital: Mrs. Brown's Beauty

Inez Brown has lived in the Subacute Care Unit of Alameda Hospital in Alameda, California, for over seven years. She lost her voice after an emergency tracheotomy and is unable to walk. At first, Inez was hesitant when the hospital staff suggested that she participate in the Art With Elders weekly art class, saying that she knew nothing about drawing. Then, one day, staff just

wheeled her into the class. Once she started painting, she loved it. Since 2003, her art has been selected every year for the annual AWE exhibit. Discovering art for the first time at the age of 74, Inez says that she is often shocked and amazed by some of the artwork she has created.

Nancy Thompson was so impressed with her aunt's artwork that she created a book, *The Artwork of Inez Brown*, as a Christmas gift in 2005. Showing a copy to friends, she found such interest in it that she set up a website, mrsbrownsbeauty.com, to share Inez's story and her artwork with the world. Her website has been viewed by people from countries all over the world, including France, China, Italy and India.

Baobab Tree, mixed media collage, 2005



An oral historian, Nancy Thompson and videographer Liz Cox produced a twelve minute DVD titled *Mrs. Brown's Beauty – A Story of Art and Inspiration*. The film captures how the AWE program can positively impact the lives of isolated and often marginalized elder artists and has been shown in film festivals in Oakland, San Francisco, and Atlanta. The film is scheduled to be shown in Kenya later this year.

Inez Brown and Nancy Thompson at an AWE Gala Reception.



Nancy Thompson has been showing the film to community groups that range from libraries to senior centers to youth organizations. She is witnessing how Inez's story is changing how

people are connecting with their own elders. One man was inspired to help his 90-year-old mother publish a book that she had written in the 1950's, and had always kept in a drawer.

Wherever Nancy shows the film, she takes pictures to share with her aunt so that she can see the different people who are being inspired by her story and her art. Inez says that words cannot explain how she feels. She never imagined that all this could happen, and it gives her quiet satisfaction to know that she will leave such a wonderful legacy.

Visit www.mrsbrownsbeauty.com to see more of Mrs. Brown's artwork and to find out how to purchase the DVD.

Meet and Greet!

There are two opportunities in June and July to enjoy AWE and mingle with others who appreciate elder art. For the June reception, there's the added attraction of the natural beauty of the Presidio and, in July, the unique shops of Laurel Village and Sacramento Street.



THURSDAY, JUNE 18th from 5:00 to 7:00 pm
Thoreau Center for Sustainability at the Presidio
Thoreau Center Gallery
1016 Lincoln Blvd., San Francisco, CA 94129



THURSDAY, JULY 9th from 5:30 to 7:30 pm
San Francisco Women Artists Gallery
3489 Sacramento Street, San Francisco, CA 94118

Where is the 17th Traveling Exhibit?

June 1 - June 12 (full 17th Annual Exhibit)
THE ORDWAY BUILDING LOBBY
(during business hours Monday – Friday)
One Kaiser Plaza, Oakland 94612

June 15 – August 2 (full 17th Annual Exhibit)
THOREAU CENTER GALLERY
The Presidio of San Francisco
1016 Lincoln Blvd., San Francisco 94129

July 6 - August 1 (20 works from previous Annual Exhibits)
SAN FRANCISCO WOMEN ARTISTS GALLERY
3489 Sacramento Street, San Francisco 94118

See eldergivers.org for directions

Thanks to the Following Sites for Hosting the 17th Traveling Exhibit

In Oakland:

Frank Ogawa Plaza
The Ordway Building

In San Francisco:

AgeSong's 580 Gallery
Calvary Presbyterian Church
City Hall
The New Federal Building
595 Market Street
Flax Art & Design
Koret Health and Recreation Center
at University of San Francisco
Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals
One Market Plaza
Rincon Center
San Francisco Women Artists Gallery
Thoreau Center Gallery
War Memorial Performing Arts Center

In South San Francisco:

Genentech



ELDERGIVERS connects the generations through programs that celebrate the wisdom, talents and creativity of older adults.

These programs survive and thrive through the generosity of foundations, corporations, faith congregations, affinity groups and caring individuals like you. Please send donations (checks made payable to ELDERGIVERS) to:

1755 Clay Street
San Francisco, CA 94109

Check out our new website

www.eldergivers.org

and make secure donations on-line.

We welcome your questions, comments and ideas for furthering our mission.

info@eldergivers.org

415-441-2650

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