



PAINTING THE BIG PICTURE

From her studio and gallery, Carolyn Stich paints award-winning promotional artwork for city events, and illustrates children’s books.

Yet the works of art she treasures most are first-time creations by novices. This professional is a fan of amateurs.

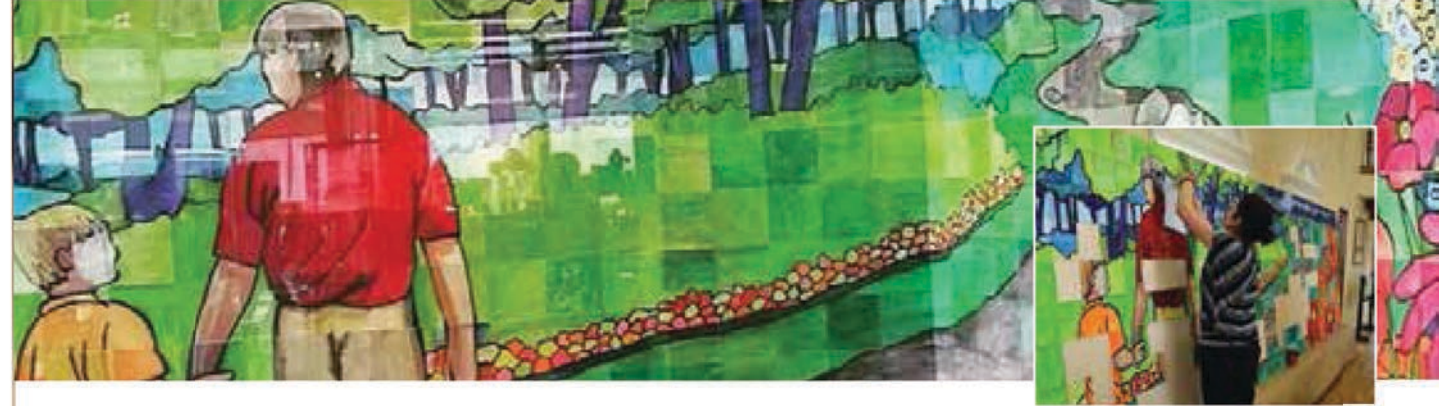
Carolyn believes everyone has the capacity to express something through art. That’s why this recruiter for the arts teaches classes for residents at Brookdale’s Freedom Village retirement community in Holland, Michigan.

Among her eldest students, Carolyn watches their spirits lift and minds sharpen.

And when people buy their artwork at Freedom Village charity fundraisers, those retirees feel a sense of purpose, knowing their work benefits worthy causes. However, these events can also be a hindrance to new student recruitment.



Carolyn says, “When other residents see the high quality of work, many feel too intimidated to join my class.”



THE BIG-EASY ART PROJECT

Carolyn met with Marcia Schrottenboer, the Director of Resident Programs at Freedom Village Holland, to talk about resident reluctance to pick up a paintbrush or pencil. What could they do to convince novices that artistry is within their grasp? How could they make a first-time art project as simple as possible, for as many people as possible?

Together, they hatched an ingenious plan. Instead of making art easier by thinking small, they would make it easier by going big. How big? Imagine a wall mural measuring 5-feet tall by 20-feet wide.

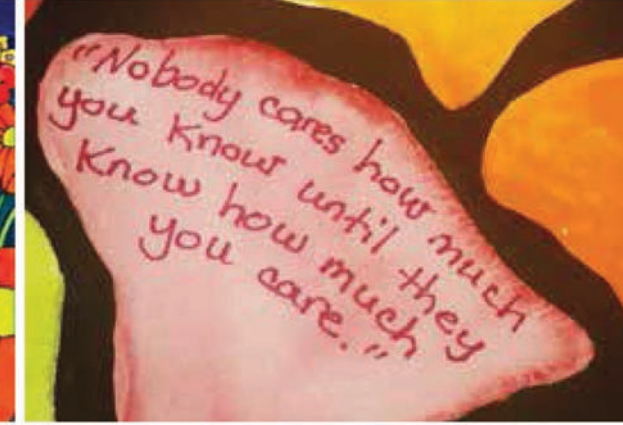
To get the project started, Carolyn created a painting in the minimally detailed style of a children’s book illustration. Her panoramic scene depicted an elderly man walking down a pathway in a park with his small grandson at his side. She titled her work “Path of Wisdom.” The canvas measured one-foot by three-feet wide.

Carolyn took a photograph of that painting and selected a specialty shop to enlarge the image on a massive five-by-20-foot print. In her studio, she marked a grid pattern on the back of the entire surface, numbering each grid. She then cut up the huge print along the grid lines to produce 400 numbered pieces, each only six-inches square.

SMALL PIECES FOR A BIG MOSAIC

While Carolyn’s art class at Freedom Village customarily drew less than 10 residents, the April social that promised to reveal plans for the new community art project attracted more than 150.

At this inaugural event, Carolyn explained the plan. Residents would take a numbered six-inch square from the print and duplicate that piece by painting a numbered blank white square. The 400 painted squares would later be assembled like mosaic pieces to form a massive wall mural. The task of duplicating a square was so small and simple, anyone could do it. Yet, the size and scope of the combined artwork would be challenging enough to draw in the whole community. When complete, the impressive mural would be something they could be proud of — proud enough to enter in an art contest.



Marcia gave her residents an ambitious goal. If they finished their mural in 60 days, they could meet the June 18 deadline to exhibit it in the most lucrative art contest in the world. A major international art competition is hosted annually in nearby Grand Rapids, Michigan. (Yes, Grand Rapids.)



BIG ART FOR BIG PRIZES

Certainly, there are more prestigious art competitions in New York and London, but none award more money than ArtPrize – \$500,000, including two \$200,000 Grand Prize awards and eight category awards of \$12,500 each. Most of those awards are determined by spectator votes. Now in its seventh year, ArtPrize typically draws 400,000 attendees and more than 1,500 competitors from 50 states and 47 countries.

At the Freedom Village mural project kickoff, most who began painting that day were novices. But a few, like Thea and John Beebe, had practiced art hobbies for years. Thea still creates paintings and colored pencil sketches while John specializes in photography and wood crafting. Whenever family or friends visit the Beebes' apartment, they often see a new creation on display and exclaim, "YOU did that?" The Beebes worked on their mosaic pieces in tandem.

Thea sketched on the blank squares in pencil. Then, John painted each one, following her lines. On that first day, Freedom Village residents created 80 of the needed 400 squares. From April until June, most mural pieces were painted each Tuesday during "ArtPrize Workshop."

During those 60 days, more than 250 residents participated.

HIDDEN MESSAGES

As Freedom Village residents painted their mosaic pieces, they added something of themselves to leave behind. They were encouraged to write words of advice to their grandchildren on their squares,

using colored felt tip pens that were slightly darker than the paint colors they used. Their messages would be too faint to be noticed in a full panoramic view of the mural. You wouldn't see them unless you were close. Most of these nuggets of wisdom residents hid in the mural were words of spiritual inspiration.

A few contributed witty advice:

"If you are not happy where you are – move. You're not a tree."

"A penny saved isn't much."

"Learn the rules – so you can break them properly."

"Don't burn the bridges in front of you."

"Don't do anything you can't tell your grandmother about."

Peg Van Grouw decided she wanted to move to Freedom Village before construction was completed 24 years ago. Peg and fellow resident Thea Beebe joined to contribute their penmanship by clearly writing messages on the squares for their neighbors who found it difficult

to keep a perfectly steady hand. On one particular slip of paper, a resident had written the saying, "A Stich in Time Saves Nine." Peg caught the misspelling of "Stitch," but she decided to write it into the mural as written, in homage to her longtime friend, artist Carolyn Stich.

By the first week of June, Freedom Village residents had painted 300 of the 400 mural pieces, so the community staff planned a final social, a "100 to Go Marathon," to finish the mural. At that event, Cathy Benedict, another 24-year Freedom Village resident, painted the square to be mounted in one of the last spots to complete the mural.

In the days that followed, residents walked along the length of the mural, looking for the mosaic pieces they painted. Carolyn observed, "Their faces lit up when they recognized their handiwork and saw how their squares fit with all the others like a puzzle. I don't think they considered the work they did on their small pieces valuable until they saw the big picture."



Whenever residents Thea and John Beebe show the finished mural to awestruck family and friends, John remarks with a grin, “The squares that look really good are the ones we did.”

SEEKING A BIG PLACE FOR A BIG MURAL

Freedom Village Director of Resident Programs Marcia Schrottenboer discovered that finding a venue willing to display their contest entry was more difficult than creating it. ArtPrize entries must be exhibited at one of 162 registered venues within a two-square-mile radius of downtown Grand Rapids.

Initially, she solicited the most desirable locations, such as the Grand Rapids Art Museum. All turned her down. She applied at more venues and received more declines. Each week that passed,

residents repeatedly saw Marcia’s bulletin update, “*Still no venue.*”

The June 18 reservation deadline was approaching fast.

LAST-MINUTE DRAMA

More rejections arrived in Marcia’s inbox June 17. But then, a last-minute acceptance message appeared from the Grand Rapids Downtown Market, a high-traffic venue that features an outdoor Farmer’s Market and an indoor Market Hall with specialty food shops and restaurants, a garden, and a cooking classroom. This “Yes” was a major victory. Marcia and her associates decided to keep their big news a secret.

They distributed special event flyers in all resident mailboxes with an urgent message from Executive Director Russ Turecky, “It is very important that you come to a social I will be hosting tomorrow night. I can’t tell you why.”

This cryptic message created curiosity, concern, and speculation about what sort of good news or bad news might be in store for Freedom Village.

The next day, more than 250 residents gathered at 3 o’clock in the afternoon for a social that was much larger than their typical “Thirsty Thursday” event.

After Marcia announced the ArtPrize venue reservation deadline was only two hours away, associates periodically

walked up to hand her batches of decline messages from exhibit venues. Marcia read the emails aloud in a disappointed tone, as if she were seeing these rejections for the first time. Resident Cathy Benedict later commented, “Marcia deserved a Best Actress Oscar for her performance.” But finally, in a dramatic twist, art teacher Carolyn excitedly ran into the room, exclaiming, “Wait! Wait!” and handed Marcia the acceptance email from the Grand Rapids Market.

Cue the applause, cheers, and champagne celebration.

PREPARING TO PROMOTE

ArtPrize 2015 ran for three weeks. To vote, attendees used one of the voting stations at various locations throughout the event areas. Freedom Village Holland residents pre-registered to attend ArtPrize and soliciting their families and friends to also come and vote. During the event, residents promoted their entry by passing out photos of the mural printed on postcards with their Vote Code # 61700.

A MOSAIC OF PEOPLE

Vincent Van Gogh said, “Great things are done by a series of small things brought together.”

Each of those small mosaic pieces painted by a resident is unique – with colors, shapes, textures, and lines that make it different from all the rest. And

each individual square fits perfectly in one particular space that none other can fill. When they join together, we can see the big picture.

Likewise, the community at Freedom Village Holland is a human mosaic.

Look closely to see the faces of residents at all the ages and stages of life, surrounded by faces of associates who serve as their caregivers, cooks, cleaners, nurses, therapists, drivers, administrators, party planners, and art teachers. Then, step back for perspective, and you’ll see the big picture.

