



# LIVING COLORFULLY

**E**ighteen residents at Brookdale's Freedom Plaza retirement community in Peoria, Arizona, volunteered to participate in a special program.

Their prescribed treatment has already yielded remarkable results, including enhanced cognitive function, increased energy levels, improved sleep/wake cycles, elevated mood and enhanced socialization.

The prescription credited with these positive results is a combination of linseed oil, minerals, aluminum stearate and horse hair. It may seem incredulous, but the ingredients commonly found in a tube of oil paint and a paint brush are responsible for dramatic transformations witnessed by associates, friends and family members. The therapeutic effects of creating art can even be measured in a medical lab.

Most of these novice artists-in-residence who experienced "awakenings" never picked up a paintbrush before they met

**MICHAEL THOMAS.**

**"This class has helped residents improve their quality of life. It has given them a purpose ... a reason to get out of bed," he says. "Many of them have displayed their own unique awakenings."**

## Michael's Suits

Michael Thomas can't keep his suits clean. He is the administrator of the Plaza del Rio Skilled Nursing Center on the Freedom Plaza campus (best known locally for resort-style Independent Living homes). Michael is also the art teacher there and can't avoid the occasional paint splatter.

During his 32-year career in skilled nursing, art was just a hobby he took up 11 years ago while living in Wisconsin to cope with the long hard winters.

After Michael moved to Arizona for the climate, he discovered benefits to his chosen pastime. Like Peoria, Scottsdale is a suburb of Phoenix but infused with its own upscale culture exhibited in art galleries. Michael's aunt is an artist there who helped him plug into the local art scene.

When a Plaza del Rio resident saw one of Michael's paintings in his office, she asked if he would teach her. He agreed, and what began as a tutoring session became a regular Thursday afternoon class for 18 skilled nursing residents.

When Michael discovered his Life Enrichment Director Rachel McDonell had taken art classes in college, he recruited her to help.



## Brian's Awakening

New artist Brian Morin now loves to paint. This 40-year-old resident recently completed work on a large canvas for his mother that features colors that coordinate all the furnishings and décor in her living room.

When the community art class was first announced he could have easily ignored the invitation. He had a good excuse. Brian is blind.

Shot in the face in his early 30s, Brian lost his sight in both eyes. Later a stroke that followed one of his surgeries left him paralyzed from the waist down. His mind is sharp, and his memories of sight give him a reference for colors and shapes. Michael prepared a round palette for him on which twelve colors of paint are always placed in the same numbered positions of a clock face.



**At their first art show in May, student paintings were displayed at a wine and cheese exhibition at Plaza del Rio.** When Brian's mother saw his impressive work hanging on the wall she stood there before the canvas crying.

### Lana's Awakening

Lana Cahill was another unlikely art class participant. Paralyzed from the neck down, she was only able to move her head.



Her paralysis, coupled with the problems of aging, left her depressed and withdrawn. "I felt my life was over," she recalled.

To enable Lana's participation in the class, Michael fabricated a brush holder from a kitchen spatula that she could grip with her teeth. He also adapted an easel and palette mounted above the armrests of her wheelchair.

**Over time Lana created abstract works that expressed her re-emerging colorful personality. "These art projects have given me a breath of new life," she said.**

Lana's husband, who visited her most every day, witnessed her progress as each piece she created was her best yet. While her mind and talent thrived, her body fell victim to the inevitable health complications associated with total paralysis.

When out-of-town family members traveled to Peoria to say their final goodbyes to Lana, her husband showed off her work tearfully proud to possess her last, best painting.

### Priscilla's Awakening

Over time, retired nurse Priscilla Wenskunas became the most enthusiastic art participant. After her struggle with diabetes required a hospital stay to amputate three of her fingers, she was eager to get back to Plaza del Rio. On the day of her return she was back in class working with bandaged hands. She explained, "What else am I going to do? Sit in my room and cry?"

Priscilla began work on a painting that recreated a scene of ice skaters in a park that she saw on the cover of New York magazine.

**When her painting was exhibited at the Plaza del Rio art show, the placard beside it displayed the title, *What Else Could I Do?***

Priscilla wasn't alone in experiencing the therapeutic effects of art creation. In the article, *Art in Senior Living*, published on the Assisted Living Federation of America website, we find this recommendation: "Art therapy is useful in promoting awareness and self-expression, relieving anxiety, and coping with transition, confusion, illness, or discomfort."

Since Priscilla's recent passing, the works of art she left behind have become treasured mementos for her family and friends. Her paintings display her positive attitude and a heartfelt desire to add beauty to the world.



**Delores Thompson** seldom left her room. She was depressed about living in a skilled nursing center and often felt there was no reason to get out of bed. Although her mood may have looked and sounded like grouchiness, it was actually profound sadness.

After Michael engaged her in several conversations, Delores decided to show him a series of Thanksgiving-themed children's poems she had written featuring the character, "Tom Turkey." Michael looked them over and said, "I think you have a children's book here. You should join our art class, and we can come up with illustrations for it."

In the Thursday classes Delores demonstrated a good eye for drawing cartoon-style illustrations. Other students helped by turning those drawings into paintings and the Tom Turkey children's book became a class project.

Whether they were painting for a loved one's home or a friend's children's book, a project with a specific goal gave participants a sense of purpose.

**This retired 87-year-old elementary school teacher had a new infusion of energy. Delores said, "This has shown me I can still teach, even from here. I was feeling alone and cast aside. Now I feel like a teacher again."**

Her daughter proudly posted updates on the progress of Delores' children's book on Facebook. In response, many of the adults Delores once taught as children posted messages of tribute to the teacher they fondly remembered.

When the text and illustrations for Delores' children's book were completed, Michael used a self-publishing software program to convert their work into pages of a hardcover book printed in a small quantity. They are now using those copies in attempts to find a publisher. In the meantime, Delores is working on her second book, *Mices and Mice*, teaching children basic lessons about grammar.



## More Are Joining In

Publicity from a newspaper article on the Plaza del Rio art class drew interest from people who wanted to help.

An art supply store donated supplies, a local professional artist volunteered to help teach the class, and artists in nearby Independent Living homes on the Freedom Plaza campus offered to assist.

Since the art class originated from Michael's hobby, he encouraged his associates to think of ways they could turn their own hobbies into classes for their residents. As a result, an associate who sings has started a choir. A juggler, a scrapbooker and an inventor are now teaching their skills.

The associates on that Brookdale campus see a role for themselves that goes beyond taking care of their residents' physical needs. They know that a resident's heart and spirit can be awakened by engaging in a pursuit that gives them a sense of purpose.



## Painting a Prescription

Painting is something more than a "warm—fuzzy," feel-good activity. Art therapy provides measurable medical benefits to participants.

In an article in *Today's Geriatric Medicine*, Dr. Barbara Bagan writes, "Neurological research shows that making art can improve cognitive functions by producing new neural pathways. Making art causes the brain to continue to reshape, adapt, and restructure, thus expanding brain reserve capacity."

In the AARP website article *Lively Arts*, Dr. Gene Cohen of George Washington University's Center on Aging contends that creative activities like painting, writing, drama, singing and storytelling raise self-esteem, increase enthusiasm for life and result in

fewer doctor visits. Cohen's ongoing study tracked approximately 300 senior men and women who participated in arts programs. They scheduled fewer doctor appointments and used fewer medications than members of a control group not involved in the arts.

**While we often treat health maladies with a pill from a bottle, we can supplement pharmaceutical cures by prescribing paint from a tube.**

## Things They Leave Behind

In our mind's eye we can envision a future scene where a woman in the fervor of spring cleaning lifts a painted canvas from the wall of her den to give the wooden frame an overdue dusting and polishing. She pauses for a moment and remembers the artist, her grandmother. The hands that stroked her hair, tied her shoelaces and generously spread frosting on her favorite cake also held a paintbrush that caressed this canvas.

It's a simple landscape with a white frame house on the edge of a meadow beneath a distant mountain range. Was this a real place her grandmother visited in her youth, or was it a place she imagined? No one knows. In the bottom right hand corner her grandmother signed her name and the year 2015.

A few inches above it there's a mistake ... a thumbprint her grandmother accidentally left in the paint when she picked up the canvas before it dried.

***That's her favorite part of the painting.***