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Art program celebrates first year with public display

Recreation therapy patients find empowerment in artistic expression

LETHBRIDGE — Dozens of southern Alberta residents are getting a reprieve from the stress of chronic illness and injury through an Alberta Health Services (AHS) program.

Expressive Arts, offered by AHS Therapeutic Recreation, is a 10-week program for individuals recovering from a stroke; living with a brain injury or chronic illness; or struggling with social isolation. Participants must be referred by a physician or other health care professional.

Every Monday, participants explore art using a variety of materials including acrylic and watercolour paints, as well as fabric, paper and canvas. Art experience or expertise is not required.

“Part of person-centred care is looking at the whole person. Expressive Arts offers a chance to explore creativity, challenge the mind, and connect with others,” says recreation therapist Heidi Davis, who leads the program.

“We’ve had clients tell us this is their first appointment in years that hasn’t been medical. Here, they can concentrate on something other than their chronic illness and pain.”

Between Feb. 3 and 9, the work of program participants will be displayed in the foyer of CASA (Creating Art in Southern Alberta) at 230 8 St. S. A come-and-go reception will be held Feb. 6 between 1 p.m. and 4 p.m. Throughout the week, art cards featuring participants’ work will be available for purchase; proceeds will be used for art supplies and to support the program.

The event is designed to promote the program and celebrate the achievements of the more than 30 people who have taken part since the program launched last spring. It’s also a way to celebrate Therapeutic Recreation Month.

This year’s theme is Wellness in Action.

“We are offering a form of self-discovery, empowerment and personal fulfilment,” says Davis. “Lots of people come in and start out staring at a blank piece of canvas, not knowing how to start. But they come and they try it and most of them leave with a sense of pride and accomplishment. They gain a new leisure skill or reclaim a past interest.

“We’ve also found coming to this class once a week can develop an activity pattern. Someone who has become isolated suddenly becomes more comfortable in the community and can consider other opportunities, like volunteering. Because they come here every week, it becomes possible to do other things.

Gerda Lewke, 68, was referred to the program after she fell as a result of undiagnosed hydrocephalus (water on the brain) and broke her arm in three places.

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Hydrocephalus can have a significant impact on balance and, as a result, Lewke says she became reclusive out of fear of future falls.

Lewke says the Expressive Arts program has helped her rehabilitation and her outlook.

“I was trying to regain the use of the arm, trying to get back my mobility and strength so I could get my independence back. The program helped my arm regain its full range of motion and pretty decent strength,” Lewke says.

“As well, you get to create something, you gain back some self-esteem and you get value from the comments of the people around you who like your work. It’s about socialization too.”

Alberta Health Services is the provincial health authority responsible for planning and delivering health supports and services for more than four million adults and children living in Alberta. Its mission is to provide a patient-focused, quality health system that is accessible and sustainable for all Albertans.

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