

The World at Our Door!

At Sherbrooke Community Centre in Saskatoon Saskatchewan, Canada we are world makers for residents. Although that may sound pretentious, it is true. For the majority of people living in long term care, their world exists inside the walls of the institution. As the leader for Communications at Sherbrooke one of my jobs is to ensure that we maximize opportunities for residents to experience the world. In fact, it is the job of every staff person and volunteer working at Sherbrooke to help create a world where individuals can thrive.

For those of you who do not know us, Sherbrooke is an Eden Alternative™ home. Our vision is to provide a rich and diverse habitat for the 270 residents and 100 community day program participants that live in our community.

The Eden Alternative™ is a powerful tool for improving the quality of life for people who live in long-term care facilities or are isolated in the community. It is a new way of thinking about eldercare and has the potential of remaking facilities and communities. The Eden Alternative™ is not a program, but rather a total philosophy that seeks to address what Dr. Bill Thomas calls the three plagues of nursing homes: ***loneliness, helplessness and boredom***

Sherbrooke is an Eden international centre of excellence and our CEO and Leader for Education train individuals across Western Canada to transform their facilities from institutions in to human habitats. Sherbrooke is a community where children, plants and animals are a natural part of everyday life. Sherbrooke supports quality of life and growth of each individual and the Sherbrooke community as a whole. We strive to provide each resident with companionship, opportunities to give and receive care and a diverse environment rich with spontaneity and variety.

Our goal is to support the health and well-being of employees. For us to create full and abundant life we must be an organization where staff can make a difference and where their work will be meaningful and rewarding. We support our staff as individual community members and encourage them to develop their strengths and passions in meeting our mission.

We work to fulfill our mission, to create full and abundant life for residents, within an external environment that is shaped by the changing expectations of the public, limited resources, and a focus on primary prevention where consumers become partners in their own health care planning.

Inherent in our vision is a commitment to: Community need, quality of life through the Eden Alternative™ Philosophy, person-directed care and services, supportive work environment, education and research, innovation and partnerships, fiscal responsibility and leadership.

With this philosophy in mind, 12 of over 50 artists actively involved in the art program at Sherbrooke, present an inspiring and exciting show for your review. For the artists, this is a life changing event and these drawings and paintings represent freedom, a voice, self esteem, and pride. We hope the *The Insiders* will be a taste of what is still to come.

Nine months ago my friend, Susan Lamb, the CEO of the internationally renowned Meewasin Valley Authority, told me about the granting process for the artist in the Residence Program through the Sask Arts Board. The MVA intended to apply for funding for an artist and she encouraged me to do the same. Our team applied for a grant, submitted a proposal and were approved.

Although we had a plan, we were unsure about what would actually happen when we got started but we knew that the talented and passionate people at Sherbrooke would make it work.. Music is a big part of the culture at Sherbrooke and it seemed to our team that another creative outlet to stimulate people and to add spontaneity and variety to the environment was needed. I have visited the American Visionary Arts Museum in Baltimore on a number of occasions and appreciated the passion of the disabled, mentally ill and disadvantaged artists that show their work but I must admit I was unprepared for the impact this program and the artist in residence would have on the lives of the residents who became involved.

From the day we interviewed the artist, Jeff Nachtigall, we knew we were in for an amazing ride. Jeff came to Sherbrooke to repair a sculpture, on loan from the Mendel. He decided that he wanted to volunteer and spoke to the Manager of Volunteers. When we started the interview process he applied and was subsequently hired.

Jeff, spent weeks getting to know the residents and encouraging them to give art a try. The day the program officially launched, residents poured through the doors into the art studio, a small former smoking room that was retro fitted for its new purpose. We quickly outgrew that space and negotiated a larger work shop space which better met the needs of the artists. In the summer of 2007, we hired two students through the Canada Works Summer Program to deal with the growing demand for assistance in the studio.

We mounted a first exhibition of the new works of the artists in January of 2007. The show was met with excitement and praise. The artists were thrilled and surprised by the response and were proud of their accomplishments. Staff and families were anxious to buy the works. We were amazed that Larry, a man with very limited mobility, was able to paint using a brush attached to his head set. His first work was limited to swatches of colour and now he was able to control his brush and do more detailed work. Marjorie's birds, Cindy's flowers, Yopie's polka dots were fantastic. Many of the artists were not convinced that what they were doing had any merit. However, with some gentle persuasion, some education, acceptance of different abilities and limitations and the use of adapted tools, new and exciting works were emerging.

Kathleen Robertson is a trained artist and studied with Eli Bornstein. In her early years Kathleen was a post modernist artist doing very precise and detailed work. Since her

stroke she has been frustrated by her inability to paint in her accustomed style. With Jeff's support and encouragement she is now doing humorous portraits that reveal her secret side. Kathleen says, "I didn't know I had this in me."

It is a delight to spend time in the art studio because it is a hub of activity and conversation. There is controversy about some of the subject matter of the art but that only adds to the opportunities for dialogue. In some cases staff and families may struggle with the feelings expressed but they too are learning to separate their feelings about the message from the positive aspects of the art itself. There are many questions about what art is or is not? Is this just an exercise to fill time or does it have merit on its own? These are interesting questions for residents, staff and families to ponder. What we know for sure is that opportunities for purposeful activity that help an individual to grow and enables him to give back to the community is essential for good quality of life.

Everyday the studio is alive with children from our partnership schools, youth from Egadz and Calder Centre and SCYAP (Saskatoon Community Youth Arts Program). We enjoy classes taught by a number of Aboriginal artists who have introduced soap stone carving, tipi and drum making. Artists have travelled to various locations to paint the most memorable of these is Wanuskewin. Artist and staff found this to be a spiritual and moving experience. To add to the excitement, the National Film Board of Canada is documenting what is happening in the art program; and long term care facilities from Saskatoon and across Canada and the United States are learning about us. In the fall we plan to develop a workshop that can be used to interest and educate other homes about the possibilities art can bring.

Another outcome of the program is that the artists with the support of Jeff and his partners from Bike Doctor, Hobby World are developing "mark making tools" from mobility aids such as walkers, canes and wheelchairs. Adapting equipment, brushes and other artist tools to accommodate quadriplegics and residents with other physical challenges has been an important part of the resident's success. Jeff is currently working on the adaptation of a wheelchair which can deliver paint to the surface of a canvas and a remote controlled tank which is being retrofitted to deliver paint using a joy stick attached to a wheelchair.

Opportunities for playfulness and creativity are few and far between for adults in our society. However, at Sherbrooke experiencing the joy and laughter, the camaraderie and mutual support among the artists is fun to watch. Picasso said, "Every child is an artist. The problem is how to remain an artist when he grows up." There is a sense of innocence or purity about this art that makes it child like in the sense that it is not self conscious or studied. It is what it is. It tells a story or it delights. It is sometimes angry but it is always honest. It is often playful!

We have brilliant staff and volunteers at Sherbrooke and their efforts to create opportunities for residents to thrive and flourish cannot be underestimated. Everyday they work to make life interesting and full for the people in their care. Sherbrooke is rich with their efforts. Music, theatre, a sense of play and spontaneity are at work here.

However, it is always exciting to try something new. The art program has opened some doors for residents who were looking for something that would engage them and art has been a huge catalyst for change. The door is wide open and we “walk and roll” through that door with anticipation and excitement!

We are grateful to our artist Jeff Nachtigall for the passion and the belief in the artists at Sherbrooke. He has an ability to convince a diverse group of people that they have something to say and that the community should hear it.

We appreciate the commitment that the Saskatchewan Arts Board has made to Sherbrooke and the artist in the community program. We salute them for having so much faith in us.

We thank the Mendel Art Gallery for their commitment to community programming and to their belief that art can be found in the most unusual places.

We thank Sherbrooke for their vision and willingness to try new things in an effort to make life more interesting for residents and day program participants.

To the 50 or more Sherbrooke artists we say thank you. You are an inspiration.

I love the quotation from Picasso that says, “Art washes from the soul the dust of everyday.” For residents in long term care facilities around the world, there is lots of dust but with hard work and a belief that life can be full and abundant, the dust blows away.

Sherbrooke artists invite you to see, feel and enjoy!

Patricia Roe
Leader for Communications
Sherbrooke Community Centre